

# CAPTAIN PEGGIE



*Angela  
Brazil*









## Captain Peggie

By ANGELA BRAZIL

THE HEAD GIRL AT THE GABLES  
A HARUM SCARUM SCHOOL GIRL  
THE PRINCESS OF THE SCHOOL  
A POPULAR SCHOOL GIRL  
THE LUCKIEST GIRL IN THE SCHOOL  
THE MADCAP OF THE SCHOOL  
THE JOLLIEST SCHOOL OF ALL  
MARJORIE'S BEST YEAR .  
SCHOOLGIRL KITTY  
CAPTAIN PEGGIE

# Captain Peggie

BY  
ANGELA BRAZIL

*ILLUSTRATED*



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# CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE NEW CAPTAIN . . . . .	1
II. ENTER LOUISE . . . . .	15
III. A LITTLE MADAM . . . . .	28
IV. THE MASCOT . . . . .	42
V. HUMBLE PIE . . . . .	55
VI. DEPUTY HELEN . . . . .	68
VII. THE SCHOOL PARLIAMENT . . . . .	83
VIII. HOME-MADE DRAMA . . . . .	96
IX. JUST FOR FUN . . . . .	114
X. AN ADVENTURE IN THE SNOW . . . . .	128
XI. LOUISE EXPLORES . . . . .	144
XII. A LANTERN CONFERENCE . . . . .	161
XIII. A SCHOOL MYSTERY . . . . .	176
XIV. ROYALTY . . . . .	184
XV. A SHROVE TUESDAY PARTY . . . . .	197
XVI. FORTUNATE PILGRIMS . . . . .	210
XVII. THE QUEST OF CULTURE . . . . .	224
XVIII. VENETIAN WATERS . . . . .	238
XIX. THE WET SATURDAY CLUB . . . . .	252
XX. THE SCHOOL MAKES HAY . . . . .	267
XXI. CYCLES AND FLOWERS . . . . .	282
XXII. PEGGIE'S BIG SCORE . . . . .	294



## ILLUSTRATIONS

"FROM BRONTË" . . . . .	<i>Frontispiece</i>
	<i>Facing Page</i>
THE STOLEN MASCOT . . . . .	50
"NORA" AND "KENNETH" . . . . .	110
"ALWAYS BRONTË FIRST?" . . . . .	174
A FEW BRIEF WORDS . . . . .	208
UNDER THE ARCHES OF ST. MARK'S . . . . .	244





## Captain Peggie



# CAPTAIN PEGGIE

## CHAPTER I

### *The New Captain*

It was a rather damp, drizzling afternoon in mid-September. Three mud-splashed motor-buses from the station—piled outside with handbags and hockey sticks, and filled inside to overflowing with an assortment of what is generally termed the “fair sex”—had steered with many hootings between a pair of great iron gates, and had drawn up on a gravel sweep in front of a large building. There, with what speed they might, they were unloading cargo. A passing stranger, watching the event, might have been instantly reassured on one point: this was certainly not an Institution for the Deaf and Dumb! On the contrary, the arrival recalled the cheerful chatter of swallows in migration, the flutter of linnets in a field of thistle-down, the buzz of bees about to swarm, or any other of the sounds and signals by which Mother Nature marks an exodus. At a distance the undulating rise and fall of voices was like waves breaking on a seashore, but at close quarters they resolved themselves into speech.

## Captain Peggie

"Connie! Hello, old sport! Why didn't you come in *our* bus?"

"Tried, but you were full up, and you slammed the door on me yourself!"

"Esmé! That's never you? Why, you've bobbed your hair!"

"Look at Susie with a pigtail!"

"Winnie says she's left her bag in the train!"

"Rubbish! I took it out myself!"

"Well, she can't find it anyhow."

"It's there, for I saw it."

"Did you have jolly hols?"

"Absolutely ripping, thanks."

"I've broken my thermos flask, and it's soaked everything in my bag."

"Oh, poor you!"

"Did you have tea on the train? Wasn't the cake horrid?"

"I never risked it. I stuck to the raspberry jam."

"I nearly missed you all at the junction. I'd got into a wrong carriage."

"Well, you're here now, at any rate."

"Isn't Esmé a scream?"

"Oh, you haven't seen Flossie yet!"

"Girls! Girls! Silence!" interrupted a strong dignified voice. "Register yourselves at the office, take your handbags and go to your own houses. In order now! Seniors first. No pushing. Middle school wait over there. Juniors this way."

At the note of authority the chattering subsided from storm to calm. One by one the brown-clad damsels



gave in their names to a teacher armed with a long alphabetical list of pupils, and were duly checked off; one by one they claimed their handbags, then in little groups they started off from the central buildings across the gardens or over the playing fields to their respective hostels.

It was the first day of the autumn term of a new school year, but Peggie Paget, with whose fortunes this book is particularly concerned, was no newcomer to Somerton Park. She had already spent three years in her hostel, and a previous year in the Preparatory Department, and was very much at home indeed in all the inner workings of the college. She was a neatly made, alert-looking girl of fifteen, with a nice straight little nose, a self-controlled mouth, a pretty complexion, light blue eyes, and plentiful hair of a shade that might best be described as flaxen turning into brown. She put up her umbrella as she walked along the dripping avenue, sheltering herself and a companion from a shower bath of rain and falling rose petals.

"Too bad to baptize us just as we arrive!" she laughed. "Come closer, Connie, I can't cover your hat! Those two behind must take care of themselves. Where's Maisie? I haven't seen her yet. Is that Annie Hall in front, walking with Kathleen? It looks like her twenty-miles-to-the-gallon stride."

"If it's Annie, she must be the daughter of Mephistopheles, who is supposed to be the father of all fiends," replied Connie curtly. "I'd a letter from the girl only last week, bidding a tearful good-bye before she started for Japan or Honolulu or somewhere. She

oughtn't to work on my feelings for nothing. They're delicate and won't bear the strain. I shall have to talk to her about it, I really shall."

"No need to excite yourself; it's Doreen Webster. It was my mistake. But look here, is Annie really and truly gone? Rather sudden, isn't it? We all thought she was going to be captain this year."

"So she would have been, only her father has accepted a professorship out east and taken the whole family with him. It leaves a vacancy at Brontë."

"It does indeed. Why, Annie seemed the absolute 'heir apparent'. It will be Maisie now, I suppose—she was always 'second best', wasn't she? Good old Maisie! She's rather a sport on the whole."

"No it will *not* be Maisie! Her cough's worse, and the doctor has sounded her chest and ordered her to Switzerland for the winter. I tell you, candidates are falling away like the ten little nigger boys. There's nobody left for a captain except Helen Armstrong."

"Helen Armstrong! But why should *she* be chosen?"

"Because she's the sixth Armstrong at Somerton, and the five others have all been captains. Miss Penrose thinks the world of them. And General Armstrong's name comes first in the reference at the end of the school prospectus, with a star to show he's 'parent of present pupil'."

"Partly because it begins with A," said Peggie, puckering up her forehead, "and the list of course is alphabetical. I can't see that *that's* any reason for making Helen a captain."

"Reason or no, she's the best sporting chance of any

of us in my opinion. Be careful, Pegs! You're poking the umbrella in my eye! Here we are at Brontë at last, thank goodness. What a wet afternoon to arrive! I want some more tea. What I had on the train wasn't nice. O hooray, I see the urn! (Good old Shepherdess!) I positively shan't be more than three seconds in changing my shoes and my mackintosh. If you're not ready, Pegs, by then, I shan't wait for you."

The house into which the two girls ran was a long, old-fashioned building with a new wing added at either end. The middle part was quaint and timbered, in sixteenth century fashion, with black beams and stone balls and copings, and the modern portion had followed the same style of architecture in cheaper materials and with less picturesque results. Brontë, as it was now called, had the distinction of being the old original dwelling on the estate of Somerton Park, and though some of the other hostels might be more convenient, its members prided themselves obstinately upon being in residence at "the Manor". It was the farthest off from the school buildings, and the nearest to the wood and to the farm, and its garden had a clipped yew hedge, and altogether in their estimation it held many advantages.

Somerton College lay only a few miles from the town of Baddesley Wells, but once you were within its great gates you could imagine yourself in the depths of the country. There were playing fields, and grass lands and a home farm, and a patch of common with gorse and bracken, and a little pine wood, and a spinney with a small stream running through it, and there was



a beautiful uninterrupted view of distant meadows and valley and hillside right up the Staplemere Gorge to Heatherley Castle.

The college itself consisted of a large group of school buildings, assembly hall, classrooms, cloak-rooms, gymnasium, art studio, library, science room, and music rooms, together with the residence of the head mistress and of some of the more advanced students, and of certain members of the staff. There were nine different hostels in various portions of the grounds, each accommodating about twenty-five girls. They were all named after famous women. "Austen", "Mitford", and "Eliot", were for seniors over sixteen; "Brontë", "Gaskell", "Nightingale", and "Cavell" held the middle school; while "Alcott" and "Greenaway" were preparatory houses for juniors under twelve.

According to an old established tradition of the school each hostel had its own captain, whose position was somewhat similar to that of a head prefect. She was appointed annually, and was supposed to be responsible for the general welfare and success of her house. She took the chair at committees, organized entertainments, urged her comrades to obtain distinctions, and indeed acted as a mixture of shepherd and sheep dog, sometimes leading her flock and sometimes driving them by sheer force of "bark and bite". The appointment of a captain lay in the hands of the house mistress, with the head mistress as referee, and was a decision of some importance, for on the type of girl who was chosen for the office would largely depend the tone of the hostel for the coming year. Naturally the



matter meant much to those who were immediately concerned. The inmates of Brontë, drinking hot tea after their arrival in the rain, could discuss little else.

"Girls who've been ear-marked as captains oughtn't to be allowed to leave the school," remarked Enid Wilkinson. "It's not playing the game. I should think Annie feels mean."

"She says she's cried quarts over it," volunteered Connie Dawson. "I meant to bring her letter to read to you all but I forgot, I'm sure she said 'quarts'."

"It doesn't matter if she said gallons or hogsheads or butts. Blubbing won't bring her back! I can forgive Maisie, she can't help being ill, but Annie might have wangled her father and stayed if she'd liked. She's let us down!"

"Left us in the lurch!" agreed Lilian Osborne, taking another piece of currant bread.

"What we ought to do is to put an advertisement in the school magazine," said Dorothy Carter. "Something like this would do:

"Wanted, strong and efficient Captain to supply unexpected vacancy in very eminent house. Will be required to win distinctions. Broad brow for wearing laurels essential, also expanse of chest to accommodate medals. Must be able to write a play with at least twenty-five leading characters in it, and must be an impartial allotter of costumes. One deaf ear and one blind eye might be considered advantages. Length of leg may depend on measurements of hockey stick, but stride must be guaranteed at never less than fifty thousand hop scotches to a square mile."

"Don't try to be funny, Dorothy!" yawned Helen

## Captain Peggie

Armstrong. "I'm tired, and the effort to laugh makes my back ache."

"Poor tenderfoot."

"Besides, when all's said and done it isn't *we* who choose the captain, it's Miss Croft."

"What a remarkable discovery! Thank you for mentioning it! How clever of you! We none of us had the slightest idea of such a thing. Had we?"

"Oh come! If you're 'sarky' I give you up!"

"Give me up to what? Haven't you finished tea yet? I'm going to settle my cubicle, and if I find any of your things on my bed I shall fling them on to the floor—so look out! Ta ta!"

"I haven't unpacked so much as a tooth-brush, so you needn't worry," returned Helen smartly.

"Waiting for the captain's room, I suppose!" was Dorothy's parting shot as she ran upstairs.

Helen did not as a rule take her companion's jokes seriously, but she flushed with annoyance at this insinuation, gulped the remainder of her cup of tea, followed Dorothy to Dormitory 3, and began to spread forth her possessions. In the corner cubicle Peggie was already arranging her hair for supper. All pupils at Somerton College were required to bring first-night necessities in handbags which they carried themselves, leaving the vast piles of luggage to be distributed at the leisure of the school janitor. Often the girls did not get their belongings till the next morning, but this time they were more fortunate. Already two of the gardeners, with well wiped boots, were carrying boxes

upstairs. The voice of Miss Sheppard, the hostel matron, could be heard giving directions on the landing.

"This way, please! What name on the label? Armstrong? Take it to No. 3. The other? Oh, that goes into the little room over the porch!"

Now the small single dormitory at the head of the stairs was the special domain of the hostel captain, and the sound of luggage being conveyed there was sufficient to rouse thrills in the breasts of many maidens. Miss Sheppard, peeping hurriedly into No. 3, ignored several eager, interested faces, and beckoned to Peggie Paget.

"Miss Croft wants you," she said. "Go to her at once. She's in the study now, so don't keep her waiting."

A most astonished Peggie gave a final comb to her hair, fixed in a slide, and fluttered from the room.

"Salaam, O Queen!" said Dorothy Carter, with a mock bow as she passed her cubicle.

"Salaam!" echoed Connie, laughingly. But Helen Armstrong turned her back and concentrated the whole of her attention upon the key of her box.

Miss Croft's study was a sitting-room bedroom at the end of the first landing. It was reminiscent of her Girton days. The bed resembled a divan, and was spread with a gorgeous eastern cover, the wardrobe looked like a bookcase, the walls held photographs of hockey teams, and there were pretty ornaments and vases of flowers. Miss Croft herself, still young and very modern, sat at a small bureau, clicking at a typewriter. She motioned Peggy to a seat, finished her

## Captain Peggie

paragraph, referred to a notebook, made an entry in a diary, then turned her chair round and began to talk.

"It's a difficult matter to choose a captain for Brontë. We had counted on Annie or Maisie. It's a task that needs many qualifications. A girl ought to be something in herself, and a good leader, and possessed of tact; able to use authority without becoming dictatorial. I've thought it over very carefully, and in the end, Peggie, I've decided on you. It's a big charge to give you, but I believe I can trust you, and that you won't fail me."

"Thank you, Miss Croft. I'll try my best," murmured Peggie, very red and embarrassed and nervous, and wishing she knew what she ought to say on such a momentous occasion.

"You've been four years at the school," continued Miss Croft, "so you're no novice at Somerton ways. And you know Brontë inside out. What we want this year is somebody to pull the house together. It isn't quite what it ought to be. Other hostels carry away the distinctions, and leave us in the lurch. We need to make a great spurt and show we're capable of big things. There was far too much slackness here the last year. It's made a bad precedent. We ought to be able to win laurels and do heroic deeds for Brontë and raise her reputation in the school. The general tone has fallen low, and I shall look to you to lift it up again. You've no need to go about preaching, but you can use your influence in the right direction. It's because I think you'll have this influence that I've chosen you. I've no need to explain your duties because



## The New Captain

11

you know them as well as I do—the great thing is to carry them out. You'll find your box in the captain's room, and you can take your bag there now and unpack. I must finish this letter before the post goes."

Miss Croft turned again to her typewriter and recommenced clicking. She was experienced in the ways of girls, and she did not expect the new captain to make a speech or give any great protestations. She preferred to let her think matters over in quiet, so dismissed her with a nod, and—

"Shut the door, please! And stop that noise on the landing! Tell Miss Sheppard I shall be ready to see her in ten minutes, and that the post-bag is not to go without my letters."

Peggie, after sending half a dozen gossiping damsels flying to their dormitories stepped briskly to take possession of her new domain. Ever since she had come from "Greenaway" to "Brontë" three years ago, the captain's room had been the summit of her ambition. The chance of ever attaining it had seemed so infinitely remote that it had been on a level with such day dreams as "If I were a princess", or "If somebody left me a fortune". To walk in and find her box there was like a fairy tale. The bag, and the brush and comb which she had left in Dormitory 3, were placed on the bed. So the girls knew. Miss Sheppard of course had told them. Were they pleased, or would they resent her elevation? What a buzz came from down the passage. Were they talking about her?

The little room over the porch was, with the exception of Miss Croft's and Miss Sheppard's studies, the

## Captain Peggie

only single one at Brontë. It had a wall-paper with a pattern of wild roses, and the furniture was enamelled pink. There was a small table and a basket arm-chair with pink cushions. A water-color sketch of the wood, done by a former captain, hung in a frame over the mantelpiece. Peggie unlocked her box and began to unpack her clothes and place them in the drawers. She did this automatically, for her whirling thoughts were elsewhere. She! Peggie Paget to be Captain of Brontë. She was hardly yet used to the idea. Captain Peggie! How extraordinary is sounded. What an utter idiot she had been when Miss Croft spoke to her. Never a word in reply except mumbled thanks. There was a big programme before her for the school year. Nobody knew better than herself that Brontë had fallen into a Slough of Despond. To raise it would indeed be a task needing energy.

"I must set myself certain things," resolved Peggie. "I must do something athletic and something clever, and something heroic. Body, brain, and soul, as Miss Penrose would say. I'll play up and win a hockey match, and I'll write a charade for the house to act at Christmas, and I'll rescue someone from drowning or burning or from under a motor-car. Will that satisfy Miss Croft? It's what she wants, I expect. To win distinctions for Brontë. It's worth doing. She must have thought me a stupid owl to stand stammering there, going as red as a beetroot. But I'll show her before the term's out that I've taken in what she told me. Hello! Time's getting on! I must hurry with my unpacking, or I shall be late for supper, and that



would be a nice thing for the new captain. I shall be glad when this first evening is over—*rather!*”

To walk downstairs to the dining-room as if nothing had happened required courage. Dorothy, Connie, and a few of her friends greeted Peggie enthusiastically, but among others her arrival caused a dead hush. Manifestly the appointment was not popular in all quarters. Helen Armstrong averted her eyes. Enid Wilkinson indeed burst out into open mutiny.

“Really, Peggie Paget, why should *you* be chosen captain, I should like to know? If anybody has a right to be captain it’s Helen, and I can’t think what Miss Croft has been doing to overlook her! Who are you to be put over her head?”

“You’d better go and ask Miss Croft that!” answered Peggie steadily. “She’s made me captain, and here I am! I’m sorry if anyone else is disappointed, but it’s not my fault. I’ll do my best, and Brontë will have to put up with me.”

“Hear! hear!” agreed Dorothy. “We certainly can’t all be captains, and I call it very bad taste to grouse. Don’t be an idiot, Enid. Ask the Shepherdess to let you have Peggie’s vacant cubicle in No. 3, then you’ll be next to Helen, and as chummy as anything. We’ll have more fun in our dormitory than Pegs in her solitary room, I’ll bet. And as for Pegs, she must hold her own. I for one mean to stick up for her. We haven’t stood by our captains much at Brontë, and it’s been jolly well the worse for us. If the old house means to score anything at all this year it must take a lurch forward. Salaams to Captain Peggie, and may

## Captain Peggie

she win us some distinctions. Sh! sh! Here's the Shepherdess! And Miss Croft behind her. Don't let them know what we've been talking about. -Cheer up, Helen, for goodness' sake! You look as if you were at a funeral. What's for supper? Fish and macaroni and pancakes. Oh, decent! I had two teas, but I'm so hungry again I could eat my serviette. Pegs, I mean to sit next to our new captain. I booked the place half an hour ago, Connie, so it's no use your trying to push yourself in. Sh! Sh! Can't you see Miss Croft is just going to say grace?"

## CHAPTER II

### *Enter Louise*

It was a week afterwards, a whole long week, and Peggie sat in her captain's room. She had arranged it entirely to her satisfaction; her books stood in a row on the shelf above the fire-place, her writing materials were on the small bureau, a large vase of autumn leaves and late flowers decorated the mantelpiece, her timetable hung on the wall, and close at hand, ready for pinning up when desired, were several neatly printed mottoes, bearing such words as "I'm busy", "Free at 2.30", "Committee here at 7.45", "Brontë before all!", "The road to success is paved with hard work". The hour between two o'clock and three was reserved for rest at Somerton Park. The girls did what they liked in it, they pottered about, and read, and pursued hobbies, or walked in the grounds. Peggie, on this particular afternoon, was leisurely sharpening a pencil and thinking over a programme for the first monthly social evening. A peculiar rap-ta-ta-tat at the door caused her to say "Come in!" She had a pre-arranged signal by which she could recognize the advent of certain chums, and guard herself from the unwanted. Dorothy Carter entered with a note addressed to "Miss Paget".

"It's just been sent down by Miss Penrose," she

## Captain Peggie

explained. "It was enclosed in a letter for her this morning. Mabel Hopkins brought it, and said you were to have it at once. May I stay, old sport? Or must I take myself off?"

"Stay, by all manner of means!" acceded Peggie, clearing some books from a chair to make room for her friend, and tearing open her envelope. She read the communication inside twice over, with a pucker on her forehead, then threw it down with a rather vexed little laugh.

"So Louise is coming after all! I never thought they'd really make up their minds. And I hoped Brontë would be too full! Jolly hard luck to be saddled with her just now; I'd rather some other captain had the benefit. However, if she's coming she's coming, and there's an end of it."

"Who's Louise? And why these heroics, please?" inquired Dorothy, offering peppermint creams.

"Louise is my cousin. She's lived most of her life in South Africa, and I never saw her before this summer. Her people are over from the Transvaal, and they decided to send her to school in England. They couldn't make up their minds where, and when term time came they were still knee-deep in prospectuses, and fluttering between athletics and æsthetics. This is what Aunt Lucy says:

"'We have at last arranged to place Louise at Somerton College, and find that most fortunately there is a vacancy at your house, so I feel much relieved, knowing you will take charge of her and show her all the ways of the place.'"



"That's the kind of thing parents do. They can't manage Louise themselves, and they dump her on to me as if she were some timid little saint who'd hover in my orbit like a piece of thistledown."

"She's no saint, then?"

"Saint! Sinner more likely! She's simply run wild in Africa, and I can tell you I don't relish the task of helping to tame a lion-cub. So she's coming this afternoon. Farewell to peace then! I thought I had enough worries already at Brontë, without adding any more. Louise! Great Scott! I shall have to ask Miss Sheppard for a tonic! I guarantee that cousin of mine would wear anybody's nerves threadbare in a fortnight. Thank goodness there's no room for another bed here, or I believe Aunt Lucy would have petitioned for us to have cubicles next to one another. Don't laugh, Dorothy! You ought to sympathize!"

"So I do, but the idea of you and your lion-cub is rather funny. Can I fancy you in the character of Androcles? We shall have to present you with a dog-chain! No. 3 is full so she can't room with us. I expect No. 5 will get the benefit of her. Is she a kid, by the way, or 'upper middle'?"

"Just thirteen, grown-up in some ways, and very babyish in others. But you'll see for yourself quite soon enough, and then perhaps you'll wish you hadn't. Oh look here! This business has upset me. I can't go on with my programme. Let's have a run round the common and into the wood. There's plenty of time before afternoon school."

The new-comer was not present at tea, and though

## Captain Peggie

later Peggie's sharp ears caught the thump of a box on the stairs, and other familiar sounds of arrival, there was no disturbance of the hour and a half sacred to preparation and to practising. It was not till after seven o'clock, when the girls had changed for supper, that the colonial cousin walked into the dining-hall at Brontë.

Ring the curtain up for Louise! Turn on the foot-lights and let her make her bow to the audience. She was not the kind of girl to slink unnoticed into any room. She entered with all the *empressement* of one accustomed to play a leading part. She was well grown for her age, with the same pretty complexion and straight little nose as Peggie, to whom she bore rather a superficial family resemblance, but her eyes were light brown, flecked with darker specks—the type of eyes which to a physiognomist invariably betokens a quick temper—and her hair was a tawny chestnut color, rather wavy and unruly, with a bleached look, as if she had worn no hat throughout the summer. She marched confidently to her cousin, and greeted her with a grin.

“I’ve turned up here after all, you see! It was a toss up between Eastbourne and Scotland. Mums wanted one and Dad the other, so I settled it for them by saying I wouldn’t go to either, and then they both plumped for you. I’ve had a fearful time getting off. Is it true you’re captain of this shanty? What fun! If you’re wanting a lieutenant let me know. Have you all these hulking girls to look after? Sh! Sh! Why should I—Sh? I don’t in the least mind anybody hearing what I say!”

"Say what you like afterwards, Lulu, but *do please* be careful now," whispered Peggie. "I'll go upstairs when supper's over, and help you to unpack, and then we can talk. If you'd like to sit next to me at the table to-night I'm sure Dorothy would change just for once. I'll ask her."

"Give up my place to your lion-cub? Certainly, Sister Androcles!" laughed Dorothy demurely, "on the distinct understanding that it's not to happen again. You must cut its claws before to-morrow, and put it among the kittens, or buy a cage for it and keep it in the menagerie. It doesn't look as if it altogether fits in Brontë yet, though it's not a bad specimen—of its kind."

Mercifully for Peggie her young relation seemed slightly overawed during supper by the presence of Miss Croft and Miss Sheppard, and refrained altogether from conversation, though her wide-awake brown eyes evidently took in full details of her surroundings. When the meal was finished and the cousins had retired to Dormitory 5, Louise burst forth into questions.

"Who's that girl who sat opposite to me? Maggie Fowler! She made me think of a prawn in spectacles, she's such an overboiled look, and her eyes goggle. And the one with the high bumpy forehead? Mary Everett! She looks 'plain Mary'. The one on the far side of her is the sort of girl who'd call her father Papa! I shall like a few of them, and I shall loathe the rest. Now don't screw up your mouth, Peggie! It's so like Miss



## Captain Peggie

Greene, my governess in Africa, and she wasn't pretty. I always say exactly what I think about people."

"You can say anything you like to me, in private, but you'll get yourself into tremendous trouble if you begin giving free opinions about girls, so remember I've warned you. They'll simply call it 'showing off' and 'cheek'. I thought you'd too much sense, Lulu."

Louise felt in her box, took out a packet of open hem pocket handkerchiefs, and with a corner of the top one removed an imaginary tear.

"I guess we'd better go on with my unpacking!" she said, skillfully changing the subject.

Peggie was already opening drawers and wardrobe to receive the contents of the trunk, but stopped in amazement at the armful of garments which her cousin was throwing on to the bed.

"Why, Lulu! What have you got here? Navy blue dress, and blue and white flannel blazer! White Jap-silk blouses! Black velour hat. Heavens, child! Don't you know we wear nothing but brown serge and tussore here? Where was your list? The whole lot's wrong!"

It was Louise's turn to prim up her mouth now.

"I told Dad I was sure it was 'brown' at Somerton, but he wouldn't believe me. He'd got all the prospectuses mixed up, and I expect he'd caught up the list of clothes from some other school. He wrote out the order, and sent it to Cartwright and Holt's, along with the list for Roy's clothes. He told Mums it was perfectly all right, and she needn't worry."

"It's perfectly all wrong," fumed Peggy. "You'll have to send these back to Cartwright and Holt's and

see if they'll exchange them. Tchh! Tchh! There isn't a thing you can wear. What Miss Croft will say I can't imagine! I'd better go and tell her at once, and ask what you must put on to-morrow. Perhaps she can find you a skirt and a jersey. A nice muddle you've made of it amongst you! Why didn't you have a look at the list for yourself?"

"I wasn't interested enough, I suppose. I didn't want to go to school at all. But I *did* tell Dad Somerton was brown. It's his own fault if he has to pay twice over. Shall I tell you a secret? I've brought Dongo, my meerkat with me. I smuggled him under my coat, and he never moved. I've put him inside that big laundry basket on the stairs, but he can't stay there long. What had I better do with him? I thought you'd love me to bring Dongo!"

Embarrassing little cousin! Tiresome, exasperating little cousin! How was any captain to deal with her? When they had all stayed together at the seaside, during the summer, Peggie had indeed made much of the pretty little South African animal, but it was quite another matter to welcome it to Brontë, where pets of any description were strictly forbidden. Visions of a double dose of wrath from Miss Croft and Miss Sheppard rose before her eyes. Louise had disappeared, and in another minute came back from the landing with a bundle of sleek fur in her arms. Peggie sighed. Her heart was soft to begin with, and it softened yet further at the sight of Dongo. She took him quietly and cuddled him.

## Captain Peggie

"You know he's not allowed at school! What possessed you to bring him?"

"I had to! Dad and Mums were going to London. What could I do with him? You wouldn't have me drown him?"

"Bless his heart, no! But surely you could have boarded him out somewhere, or even sent him to the Zoo."

"I never thought of that! He'd fret without me though and break his heart."

"And what do you imagine you're going to do with him here? You're a Gubbins, Lu!"

"I don't know. I trust him to you. You're captain, aren't you?"

"Yes, unfortunately I am. I suppose I ought to take him straight away to Miss Sheppard, and a pretty to-do there'd be. There was a fearful row last term over some newts that Betty kept in a box. They escaped and Miss Croft found them crawling up the window curtains. Between Dongo and your wrong clothes you'll start your career here as the black sheep of Brontë. Nice thing to have you for a cousin!"

"Cheer up! You're going to look after Dongo! I know you are!"

"I'm puzzling over a plan," admitted Peggie. "You can't keep him in your cubicle, that's very certain! I might take him to my room just for to-night, then to-morrow morning, before school, we might smuggle him to the stables, and ask Mr. Hall to look after him. He might have an empty rabbit hutch or somewhere to put him. It's worth trying, at any rate."

"Oh, jolly! What a sport you are!"

"A very bad captain, I'm afraid," said Peggie uneasily. "Now if you like you can come to my room, and we'll stow Dongo away, and then I must go to Miss Croft and break the news about your absurd blue clothes. Be prepared for squalls. I don't believe such a thing has ever happened before, and she'll be appalled."

A meerkat, even of so tame and cuddlesome a description as Dongo, is an anxiety in one's bedroom, especially when he breaks bounds and takes to exploring. Peggie spent a disturbed night, and by the morning was almost tempted to betray the burdensome secret. She went down early, begged some food from the cook, and fed her cousin's pet, after which he fortunately went to sleep, and she left him curled up inside her wardrobe. The first available opportunity after breakfast, under plea of showing Louise the grounds, the two girls started off for the stables. Dongo, the innocent cause of all the trouble, was concealed under his mistress's borrowed brown jersey. They ran across the playing-field, and took a cut through the kitchen garden between the rows of celery and cabbages, and tore in through the gate to the stables. Somerton Park made rather a cult of teaching riding, and four horses and two ponies were kept for the benefit of the pupils. They were looked after by Hall, a superior old coachman, who in his early youth had been under-groom to royalty, and who liked to boast that he had once held the leading rein of a princess's pony, and had followed many distinguished people to the hunting field. By great



## Captain Peggie

good luck Hall was discovered in the harness-room, and Peggie, who had received riding lessons from him, and was rather a favorite, put forth her plea with all the eloquence of which she was capable. Hall stroked his chin as he listened, then inspected Dongo.

"It seems a tame enough little beast," he commented. "You oughtn't to ask me, Miss Paget! You know you oughtn't! But—well! There's that empty hutch where my girl used to keep rabbits. You may put it there if you like, and I'll look after it. There's no need to say anything about it to anybody, that I can see. Take it away with you at Christmas. That's all I bargain for."

"Thank you ten dozen times! What a trump you are!" exploded Louise, kissing Dongo as she pushed him through the door of the rabbit hutch. "I may come and see him? Oh, every now and then, *please!* It's splendid to feel he's safe here, and——"

"Lulu, we simply must sprint!" urged Peggie. "Not another moment! If we don't tear back this absolute second, we shall be late for school."

As the shortest route to the central buildings the cousins hurried along the back drive, and much to their surprise had hardly gone more than a hundred yards before they were overtaken and joined by Helen Armstrong.

"Hello!" she greeted them, "you're a bright pair, aren't you? The almighty Captain of Brontë paying a surreptitious visit to the stables before school! Is this what we teach new girls?"

"Why shouldn't we go?" said Peggie, bluffing the matter off.

"Why not? Oh, no reason at all, of course!" mocked Helen. "Captains needn't keep rules like ordinary people. They can break bounds whenever they want, and take their cousins. Oh dear, yes!"

"What are you talking about? The stables aren't out of bounds."

"What are *you* talking about? They certainly are!"

"It's the first I've heard of it!"

"Then you must be as deaf as a post or as blind as a bat. Weren't you listening when Miss Penrose gave it out? And didn't you see it on the list of 'forbiddens'? You of all people not to know the rules! Comic, I call it. We've got queer captains nowadays at the old college."

Peggie had flushed very pink. She remembered now that the Head had read aloud a fresh list of school bounds, but at the time her imagination had been so taken up with all she meant to do for Brontë that she had scarcely heard them, and the paper subsequently given her, in her official capacity, still lay on her dressing-table unread. It was dreadful to have to confess as much to Helen—Helen of all people in the world.

"Look here! I really, honestly, didn't know!" she stammered. "I'll go through the rules again. I'll pin them up in every dormitory. I'm awfully sorry about this—this mistake. I suppose you——"

Helen gave her a quick sidelong glance.

"No! I'm not going to tell anybody," she answered. "But I keep my own thoughts all the same. Some day perhaps we'll be quits. There's the bell! I'll race you

to the porch! I can run though I'm not captain of Brontë."

Peggie passed into school in a most perturbed state of mind. Here was she, the head of her hostel, pledged to raise the tone of the house and to keep order, actually breaking the rules, both ignorantly, by visiting a spot which was now out of bounds, and knowingly, by smuggling the meerkat into the charge of Hall. Oh! she ought to have taken the wretched little beast straight to Miss Sheppard, and have left her to deal with the matter. Would it be better to confess now, and have done with it? No! Having gone so far and with such success, it would surely be wiser to say nothing, especially as to tell would be to involve her cousin in trouble. Miss Sheppard had been even more annoyed than Miss Croft about Lulu's clothes, and the girl had evidently made a bad start at the hostel. She would stand by her and shield her as far as she could. It was most unfortunate that Helen should have witnessed their visit to the stables. Did she guess why they had gone there? Had she followed them, or was her arrival an accident? She was not the kind of girl to allow generosity to interfere with her plans. Could her word be trusted?

But the necessity of concentrating her mind on mathematics temporarily banished Peggie's immediate worries, and it was not till the eleven o'clock interval that she was able to refer to them again. While she ate her biscuits she sought out Louise.

"You've got me into a horrible scrape!" she began.



"I say, Lu, you'll have to behave yourself at Brontë if you don't want to disgrace the family."

"Oh, it's not as bad as all that! I always get out of scrapes somehow!" said Louise easily.

"Listen to me, and do take it seriously! Can't you realize that I'm captain of Brontë, and that I'm bound to make people keep rules? It's a tremendous trust to be captain. Have you no sense of honor? Don't you see I'm responsible for all that goes on?"

"Now you're getting cross!"

"No, I'm not cross, only, Lu, I do want you to help and not hinder me at Brontë. I didn't know I was taking you out of bounds this morning. If I'd known I shouldn't have gone to the stables. You must promise me never to go there again!"

Louise pursed her mouth into a round button. Her brown eyes were enigmas.

"Bow wow!" she said at last. "My promises are always pie crust, so what's the use of making them? Be a sport, Pegs, and there's one thing I'll promise at any rate—if I ever find you in a very big hole, I'll do my level best to get you out again, and that's that."

## CHAPTER III

### *A Little Madam*

Captain Peggie, sitting in the solitude of her study-bedroom decided that if everybody has a thorn in the flesh sent for disciplinary purposes, hers was certainly Louise. Her irrepressible young cousin seemed for the present almost devoid of a conscience; if you spoke about honor, she stared—if you scolded she laughed. What were you to do with such a girl? Apparently she cared for nothing but her own ideas of fun, and was as empty hearted as an elf or a pixy. And yet—and yet—Peggie turned again to the letter from her mother that lay on her knee.

“So little Wildfire is at Somerton after all! It's the best thing possible for her. I am glad she is in your house, because I think you're one of the few people who can influence her. I believe she is really fond of you, and you'll help to make something of her in the end.”

“Fond of me!” groaned Peggie. “It's a queer sort of affection then. Anyhow she's my cousin, and she's here—very much here. I suppose it's what is called an opportunity. Oh, I feel more like a missionary than captain of Brontë! There ought to be a reformatory for untamed lion-cubs before they're drafted on to board-

ing-schools. It sounds like a new career for women, though I don't think I'll take it up myself, thanks!"

Among the younger members of the hostel Louise had found favor. Her outspoken tongue had met with equal frankness, and she heard many uncomplimentary remarks, but she did not seem to mind these in the least; on the contrary, she rather revelled in a battle of words. The day after her arrival at Brontë she held what might be called a preliminary tournament, to settle her position among her companions.

"So you come from Africa?" began Betty Yates, tilting the first lance. "I suppose most of your friends are black people out there?"

There was a gleam in Louise's eyes, but she answered with the utmost calmness.

"How clever of you to guess! We've three degrees of blackness 'out there'—brown-black, which doesn't count for much; ordinary black, which is quite respectable; and blue-black, the color of fountain-pen ink, and that's the most aristocratic of all. We've a native proverb 'the blacker the better'. Our fashionable ladies touch up their cheeks with grate polish instead of rouge. They always keep a tin handy in their pockets. Anything else you'd like to know about them? Shall I describe our kraal at home?"

The girls giggled, and someone said: "Don't be an idiot, Betty!" and lance number 1 fell into the arena. But there were plenty of others ready for the attack.

"I suppose you've never been to a school like this before?" ventured Jeanie White.

"Hardly!" said Louise, shaking her tawny hair.

"You see we generally had to have our classes on platforms in the trees, because of snakes. It was rather pleasant and airy up there, though the monkeys were a nuisance and stole our books."

"Think you're showing off, if you ask me!" said Jeanie, turning scornfully away.

"But I didn't ask you! It was you who asked me! A question deserves an answer I suppose!"

"Have you lived in England at all?" queried Lena Collins.

"We spent this summer at Fenton-super-Mare."

"So you come from Fenton?" put in Joyce Blackwood. "Do you know Sir George and Lady Hartlebury who live at The Hall?"

"Well, you see, knowing the Prince of Wales, and the Duke and Duchess of York, and Princess Mary, and the rest of the royal family so intimately, I've never had much time to bother with Sir George and Lady Hartlebury—though I daresay they're quite nice!" returned Louise smartly.

The girls hinnied at this, for Joyce was fond of climbing her high horse, and liked to impress people with her list of aristocratic acquaintances.

"I've met many celebrities!" Louise went on shamelessly. "Lord Kitchener gave me my feeding bottle once when I was a baby. I've a limerick on my name composed by the Poet Laureate. A portrait of my ten toes by Augustus Johns was exhibited in the Royal Academy before I was two. Lloyd George has tied my hair ribbon, and the President of the United States has wiped my eyes with his own pocket handkerchief,



and Paderewski taught me to play a five finger exercise, and I've a book-marker worked for me by the Queen of Spain, and——"

"Don't! Don't! No more, thanks! That'll do! What an awful Mathilda you are!" said Lena.

"Why a Mathilda?"

"Mathilda told such dreadful lies,  
It made you gasp and stretch your eyes!  
Her aunt, who from her earliest youth  
Had kept a strict regard for truth,  
Attempted to believe Mathilda,  
The effort very nearly killed her!"

"If you don't know your *Cautionary Tales* it's time you read them, 'Mathilda' at any rate. Betty can lend you the book."

"Thanks for the compliment. But you're not easily satisfied. First you ask me for Native Africa, and then for Society, and you don't want either when you get them."

"Let her alone!" came Jeanie's scathing voice. "I tell you she's just showing off, and it really isn't worth listening to her. The more you giggle at her, the more pleased she is with herself. If you take no notice of her nonsense she'll stop."

Louise was certainly not the type of shy new girl who sits surreptitiously mopping her eyes in a corner. Peggie could detect very few signs of home-sickness in her. She took everything, including scoldings and teasings, in a light and airy fashion, though, if driven too far, her eyes seemed to flash sparks and she could hold her own against Jeanie or anybody. The girls

## Captain Peggie

found that the "lion-cub", as they nicknamed her, could not be bullied with impunity, and as Betty pithily put it, "If you twist her tail out come her claws". There were smiles, however, on her face, and if she had troubles, she appeared to be taking them pluckily. Peggie was quite unprepared for what happened on the eighth day after her cousin's arrival. It was free time, and she had been to the library for a book. She was just walking out of the Central Buildings, when she heard her name called, and saw Miss Penrose beckoning to her to return.

"I want you, Peggie!" said the worried head mistress. "Where's Louise? Have you noticed that she was very miserable? She's written a tremendous letter home, and her mother has come over about it. You'd better speak to Mrs. Roper. She's here, in my study."

Inside the classic precincts of Miss Penrose's private sitting-room Peggie's aunt was having something approaching a fit of hysterics. She greeted her niece wildly.

"What have you all been doing with my poor child? I thought I could have trusted *you*, Peggie, to look after her! I wish I'd taken her with us to London and never sent her to school! Where is she? Let me see her!"

"Why, Lulu's perfectly all right, Auntie!" replied Peggie. "What's the matter? She seems rather jolly at Somerton."

"Jolly!" echoed Mrs. Roper. "Jolly indeed! Read this letter for yourself! I only hope I'm not too



late——” and she began to sob again, and dabbed her forehead with eau-de-Cologne.

Peggie, who had previous experience of Aunt Lucy's moods, turned her attention to the letter. It was from Louise to her mother, and it ran thus :

“DARLING MUMS,

“This is the most hateful, horrible place on earth, and I am utterly miserable. I have eaten nothing since I came, and I lie awake crying all night. If you don't come and take me away I shall throw myself in the pond near the wood. It's a nice deep one, with plenty of mud at the bottom. All my handkerchiefs are wet through, and I have had to borrow Peggie's.

“Come soon if you want to find me still alive. Love to Dad and yourself.

“From LULU.

“P. S. Dongo has a safe home if you've been looking for him.”

Peggie handed back this wonderful epistle with a shake of her head.

“It's just Louise! She hasn't borrowed any of my handkerchiefs! As for the pond, that's rubbish! She's playing games with some of the Lower Third in the Recreation Hall. I saw her only ten minutes ago.”

“Then we'll go and find her, and you shall see for yourself whether she looks happy or not,” said Miss Penrose briskly to Mrs. Roper. “We'll peep through the door, and watch her without being seen.”

The Recreation Hall was close to the Central Buildings, and in a few moments Aunt Lucy was conducted there by the perturbed head mistress, and bidden to peep through the glass upper panel of the door at the

## Captain Peggie

scene inside. Louise, with loose hair, crimson cheeks and sparkling eyes, was racing and chasing in a wild game, laughing tumultuously, and shouting at the pitch of her voice. A more perfect picture of thorough enjoyment could not be imagined. Mrs. Roper flung open the door, and called her in a voice that held a tremble. Miss Penrose judiciously steered mother and daughter into a dressing-room and left them alone together.

Later on in the day Peggie cornered Louise, and tackled her upon the subject.

"Look here! What possessed you to go writing home such absurd nonsense? What did you do it for? What was the sense of it? Pond indeed! And my pocket-handkerchiefs! I wouldn't lend them to you if you asked!"

Louise had the grace to look rather ashamed of herself.

"I really don't quite know why I wrote it!" she confessed. "The fact was I thought somehow Mother expected it. She made such a fearful wail when I went and said I mustn't forget her. I fancied she'd be rather disappointed if I wasn't homesick, especially as I hadn't wanted to go to school. It seemed a little tame to settle down too easily. I guessed I'd got to play up and tell her I was crying quarts."

"You are the limit! A precious mess you made of it, bringing your mother over here on purpose."

But Louise was smiling humorously.

"Oh Mums enjoyed it! She hadn't seen Somerton! Dad brought me here while she went to Uncle Arthur's. She wouldn't have been satisfied unless she'd come her-

self. She peeped into Brontë and I showed her my cubicle, and we looked at the schoolroom and the gym."

"I wonder you didn't take her to the pond!"

"I would have done if there'd been time. She'd have loved the wood. It was a pity she had to scramble away so soon."

"It's a pity you haven't more sense. I expect Miss Penrose will have something to say to you. Don't write any more outrageous fibs to your home folks, though I should think by now they'll hardly believe anything you tell them."

"*Peccavi!*" said Louise, conjuring up an enormous mock sob. "Will you lend me a pocket-handkerchief, please! Mine are all——"

"No, I will *not* lend you a pocket-handkerchief! Go out of my room, you young wretch! If there's anybody in this wide world for whom I'm sorry it's your mother."

"True, O Captain! And yet it's a most funny and extraordinary thing, but I believe Mums rather likes me," was Louise's parting shot just before she slammed the door and sauntered jauntily down the stairs.

Incidents such as these certainly made a disturbing influence at Brontë, but Peggie could not allow her cousin to monopolize the whole of her attention. There were other things to be seen to, things which it greatly behooved her to evolve and arrange. That very evening there was a committee of captains, and she was due in VIb classroom at the Central Building as representative of Brontë. Except for a short preliminary meeting on the second day of term, this was the first real

conference of the heads of the various houses. Here they were all assembled together, from tall Barbara Davies, captain of Mitford and head of the school, to short-skirted Aileen Pooley, who preserved the honor of the juniors at Greenaway. When Peggie entered, everybody seemed to be talking, but it was conversation in little groups, and not remarks addressed to the "chair". The room indeed reminded her of a game of "clumps", for the members sat in three separate circles. Joining herself to her colleagues of the middle school, she sat down and looked at her watch.

"That's a hint we ought to get to business!" said Dorothea Chapman, of Eliot. "It's all right! Bab's waiting for some papers that Lizzie promised to bring across. They can't be long now!"

"We'd better begin without them," said Barbara. "It's after half-past, and we've just heaps to do. We'll take reports first and then go on to matches and socials. Oh! Rachel has a matter she considers urgent. Very well, it shall follow the reports."

The short account of her house read by each captain was mainly statistics as to the number of girls and their capabilities for hockey, badminton, drama, or music. It was a kind of general census, so that every hostel should register what talent it could produce. The lists were compared and filed by Barbara, who kept them for reference, somewhat as an over-lord of the Middle Ages might preserve an account of the men-at-arms to be furnished by vassals.

"And now about this business of Gaskell's?" she



inquired, folding the reports and putting them into her despatch-case. "Stand up, Rachel, and explain yourself. I don't understand what's the trouble."

Rachel Arnold, a ruddy-cheeked girl in spectacles, a little self-important with the honor of representing her house, rose at once to address her audience.

"It's about the fifth of November," she began. "We've had a Guy Fawkes Committee at Gaskell, and we've all come to the conclusion that this year we'd like to have our fireworks in our own garden. We've heaps of weeds and waste wood for a bonfire, and we're making a special collection to buy rockets; besides which Allie Austin's father is sending us a box of fireworks. So we think we'd rather not join the rest of you—if you don't mind."

A gasp of surprise went round the meeting.

"Do you mean you want to have your jollification entirely on your own?" inquired Edna Copeland, of Austen.

"Why not? It would be far better fun. There are so many of us at the big bonfire, we can't get near, and the same with the fireworks, they're jumbled up till you don't know which rocket belongs to which house. And as for the toffee, we made *pounds* last year at Gaskell, and those kids from Alcott and Greenaway got hold of the tins in the dark and took it nearly all. We say this year we'd like to keep ourselves to ourselves, and not go outside Gaskell garden."

Rachel's speech made such a sensation that, as is common in unbusinesslike committees, each member



began to talk fast and furiously to her neighbor, instead of addressing "the chair".

"Order!" cried Barbara. "Is this to be put as a proposition, or has anyone any comments to offer? One at a time, please."

In spite of her last injunction, the criticisms rang out all together.

"A jolly good idea!"

"Our toffee disappeared too!"

"I'm sure *we* didn't take it!"

"They want all their fun to themselves!"

"I call it the very limit!"

"We'd better each have our own bonfire!"

Barbara in despair clapped her hands.

"Be quiet, can't you! Am I in the chair, or am I not? Then speak in turns! Dorothea" (nodding to the captain of Eliot), "you first!"

"If you ask my opinion, I think it seems a selfish policy. I've been at school six years, and we've always clubbed together for the fifth and had our bonfire in the central field. If each house is going to have its own, it will mean a poor show all round—a family party in one's own backyard kind of business. As for toffee, it's sure to be looted if you leave it about."

"We might have a circle of bonfires in the field, and then we could each keep to our own and yet be together!" suggested Phyllis Drake, who had been trying to catch the chair-woman's eye.

"And have nine separate Guys!" broke in Edith Nowell of Alcott.

"May I put it as a proposition?" urged Rachel eagerly.

"One minute, please!" interrupted Peggie. "I haven't had my say yet. Won't it be very poor sport to have all these little rival bonfires? Oughtn't the old college to have more public spirit and send up one big united blaze, and let people round see what Somerton is doing? A rocket here and there won't look anything. We've always made a show on the fifth. I believe it's one of the sights of the neighborhood to go on the hills and watch our bonfires. We don't want to let down the reputation of the school, do we?"

"Peggie's right!" said Barbara. "I couldn't have put it better myself. It's the very thing I was feeling, and I've been wanting to talk to you about. The worst of having hostels is that we get so abominably self-centred in them. Oh yes! Pull faces if you like! Of course we must be loyal to our own houses and want to win distinctions for them and the rest of it, but we needn't divide ourselves into nine different factions and squabble. We ought to be like the United States, each self-governing, but all joined together in a general way. There are certain things we've always done separately, such as Hostel Plays, but there are others we've always done in full force, and if we drop them it will be rather tame. It seems to me it's a question of Houses versus College. Rachel had better put her resolution, and we'll take votes. The proposition is that Gaskell and any other hostel that so wishes shall

## Captain Peggie

be permitted to hold its own celebrations, and to administer its own funds, instead of joining in the public festival. Is that correct, Rachel? Is there any other amendment? Very well, we'll take a show of hands. Those in favor of the proposition! Those against! Thanks! Defeated by six votes."

Only three captains had plumped for private fireworks, and these, rather sulky and subdued, did not obtrude themselves during the remainder of the meeting. The rest of the business was easily settled, and the delegates were dismissed to their various hostels to report progress to their members and discuss the pros and cons of the burning question of the evening.

"How disgustingly mean of Gaskell!" was the verdict of Brontë. "They've got some good fireworks promised, and they want to keep them all to themselves! Did you sit upon them thoroughly? We must take care they really turn up their fine box on the fifth. They can't be trusted not to let it off in a corner."

"I said all I could, and Barbara rubbed it in with salt and vinegar."

"Are you always at loggerheads with Gaskell?" asked Louise, who had been listening to the report with deep interest.

"Not exactly, but you may certainly call them our rival house," answered Dorothy. "We've more squabbles with them on the whole than with any other."

"Bab said we were to forget squabbles and work together for the coll. and be really public spirited," put in Peggie.

“Then let Gaskell forget and behave herself! It’s she who’s the offender, not Brontë. *We* haven’t done anything to be ashamed of,” declared twenty-four rather pharisaical damsels, pluming themselves upon a self-registered record of collegiate virtue.

## CHAPTER IV

### *The Mascot*

It was getting very near to the 5th of November. The autumn leaves, which had shone russet, red and golden in Somerton Park, were blown off by high gales, and whirled like troops of wandering fairies across the little common and over the playing fields. A sharp early frost had killed nearly all the flowers, and even the bracken in the wood looked sad and sodden. The gardens, which the girls had tended with such care in the summer, were for the most part abandoned; candidates for the spring show had tidied their plots and planted their bulbs, so beyond occasional weeding there was nothing more to be done. Brontë, in company with its fellow middle-school hostels, spent its spare time at games or walks. Only Gaskell still clung to horticulture. In spite of persuasion they would not join in the extra hockey practices or the autumn rambles.

"We're too busy gardening!" Rachel would say, with an emphatic shake of her head.

"Gardening! What are they up to?" commented Dorothy to her chums at Brontë. "I peeped over their hedge yesterday, and saw them piling up weeds into what looked suspiciously like a bonfire."



"They'd never dare to have one!"

"It was vetoed at the committee meeting!"

"Barbara wouldn't allow it!"

"Well, go and look for yourself over the hedge!"

"Haven't they given to the Fireworks Fund?"

"Oh yes, they've done that!"

Gaskell had indeed contributed quite handsomely. She had actually subscribed more than last year, and was even sixpence ahead of Brontë on the list. Her captain was on the general bonfire committee and appeared interested in the arrangements, and had further made the suggestion that each house should provide two pounds of toffee for the occasion, the whole to be pooled and distributed impartially by stewards.

"All the same there's something underhand going on," persisted Dorothy. "Watch those Gaskellites and you'll see they keep looking at one another with a kind of triumph. I don't like it. I tell you they're laughing at us!"

Whatever might be the cause of Gaskell's suppressed mirth the members kept the matter well to themselves and the suspicious Brontëites gained no hint of what was going to happen. They almost forgot about it in the excitement of half term. November 5th fell this year on a Monday, and the week-end constituted the usual break. By the rules of the college no exeats were allowed, but special holiday outings were arranged on Saturday under the care of teachers. The First Team had gone to play a hockey match; some of the Sixth Form had been taken by Miss Penrose to a matinée of

*Peer Gynt* at Baddesley Wells; the Juniors held a belated Hallowe'en party; and Brontë, in a body, had been for a chestnut and beechmast foray in the woods with Miss Sheppard. They returned at dusk, rather late for tea, and lingered over hot scones and honey, with the delightful sensation that there was no practising or preparation waiting to be done. Betty Yates, running upstairs for a clean handkerchief, returned with news that broke up the complacency of the party.

"There's quite a blaze over at Gaskell and they're letting off crackers!" she announced.

"What!"

"Where?"

"Surely not!"

There was a general stampede, and all the girls flew to those windows which commanded a view of the rival hostel. Betty's unbelievable tale was only too true. From the garden of Gaskell rose a red blaze, smoke and sparks, while sounds as of bombardment broke the silence.

"Well! Of all the sneaks!" exploded Dorothy. "To go and have their fireworks beforehand, instead of waiting till Monday! It's abominable!"

"It oughtn't to be allowed!" said Connie.

"Oh-o-o-h! Look at that lovely rocket," shrieked Helen.

"I wonder if they've got a Guy?"

"And Catherine wheels!"

"It's a big bonfire!"

"No wonder they looked so smug!"

"Oh, I hate them!"

"I expect they've pounds of toffee!"

"And we're keeping all ours until Monday!"

"I vote we eat it now!"

"Look here, can't somebody stop them?"

"It's not fair!"

"I'll go and ask the Shepherdess whether anything can be done," said Peggie. "Pity Miss Croft isn't here! And Miss Penrose and Barbara and Edna and Dorothea have gone to *Peer Gynt*, and they were to have tea in Baddesley afterwards, at the 'Wells', and hear the orchestra, so they probably won't be back for ages. That's what those sneaks counted upon! Oh, it's a horrible, mean trick. I could hardly have believed it!"

Miss Sheppard, known in private among the girls as "The Shepherdess", was putting away linen, and stopped in the midst of counting towels to listen to Peggie's plaint.

"It certainly seems too bad of them," she agreed. "Especially when it was arranged you should all share the fireworks on Monday. But I don't see what we can do. Go and inquire! My dear child! Impossible! I've nothing whatever to do with any house but Brontë. How could I interfere with Gaskell? Don't be unreasonable, Peggie, surely you can see for yourself that *we* shouldn't like Miss Parsons or Miss Andrews to come running in here to ask why we were clipping our hedges or painting our windows? It would be no concern of theirs!"

"But this is different! It's very much our concern! They're using up all the fireworks before Monday!"

## Captain Peggie

"It can't be helped. We may be annoyed, but it's not school etiquette to take any notice of what another house may do. Gaskell is responsible to Miss Penrose and not to us. That's final, Peggie."

The disappointed captain went back to tell the failure of her mission to her indignant friends.

"The Shepherdess takes it far too coolly," commented Connie. "She might have let one of us go with a message to see if Miss Penrose has come back, or Barbara."

"Bab will see the blaze for herself directly, when she arrives. I expect she's still eating iced cakes at the 'Wells'. It was abominably clever of those Gaskellites to choose this particular time. No wonder they laughed."

"We'll make them laugh out of the wrong side of their mouths," grunted Esmé.

"They really do deserve something!" began Peggie impulsively. "If only I weren't captain I'd——"

"What would you do?" asked Louise, who stood beside her at the window.

"Oh, something to get quits!"

"What?"

"Never mind!"

"Do tell me! Just whisper it!"

Louise linked her arm in her cousin's, and placed a beguiling ear in a position ready for confidences. She could be absolutely charming when she chose.

"Well, I'd go into their garden and steal their mascot."

"Their what?"



“Their mascot—that wooden ship’s figure-head they keep on the rockery. They call it their luck, and think the world of it. They put garlands of flowers round its neck, and all sorts of nonsense. There’d be a pretty to-do if they lost it.”

“Oh, I say! So there would.”

Occasional rockets flared up from Gaskell, and colored lights sometimes varied the red glare of the bonfire. Evidently the girls were holding carnival in the garden, and even the Brontëites, in spite of their hot wrath, could not help admiring the spectacle. They stopped at the windows to watch instead of going downstairs to play a ping-pong match as they had intended. In the midst of all the talking Louise slipped quietly away. She went downstairs and put on her jersey and her rubber-soled shoes.

“Now I don’t know whether I’m allowed out of Brontë on a half-term holiday or not,” she soliloquized. “I don’t mean to ask. You can’t break a rule if you don’t know it beforehand. It’s rather convenient to be a new girl. There’s always the excuse that no one’s told you. I mean to have a peep at that precarious crew, and if I can get their mascot so much to the good. Here goes, anyway!”

There was nobody about to see or to forbid. Louise crept softly from Brontë, ran along the central drive till she came to Gaskell, then slipped like a shadow into its garden. She kept under the bushes and made her way towards the light of the bonfire, then sheltering beneath a rhododendron, she had a fairly good view of the scene. The girls were running about bringing



piles of weeds and throwing them on to the blaze. They seemed to be roasting chestnuts or potatoes in the hot ashes, for somebody kept going to turn them.

Rachel and her chum Mollie, unmistakeable in the firelight, were letting off showers of red and green sparks. A large tin of something, probably toffee, was being handed round.

"H'm! They're having far too good a time," sniffed Louise. "I'd like to put barrels of water over their old bonfire. I wish I were a rainmaker, and it should pour. What a joke it would have been to telephone to Baddesley for the fire brigade. But certainly that would mean getting into a bigger scrape than I'd care for. Dad says they charge for the fire engine. I'd like to snatch a piece of their toffee. I could get the whole of that tin down there. But then I should have to show myself, and they'd follow me. No, it wouldn't do. I must sneak away while they're busy here and find their rockery. I'm glad I brought my electric torch. It will be a help."

Exploring a strange garden in the dark is not a particularly easy task. Louise pursued many paths, and ran ruthlessly over beds until at last she came upon a group of large stones with ferns growing in between them. Here, by the aid of her flash-light she made out the wooden figure-head which was the object of her quest. The base of it was well embedded in stones, and she had to use considerable force to wrench it away before she could stir it from its position. She was muscular for her age, and a good heave finally freed it. She clasped it in her arms and hurried away

with what speed her burden would allow. Near Gaskell gate she had a severe scare. Somebody was coming along, somebody with an electric torch, who called out "Good-bye" and then walked up the path towards the house. Crouching among the laurel bushes to the left, Louise scarcely dared to breathe until the danger had passed.

"Miss Parsons coming back from Baddesley," she said to herself. "If she'd flashed that light upon me I'd have been done for. Thank goodness she never thought of the bushes. I must be careful there's no one in the road outside. I'll leave the mascot here while I reconnoitre."

All was quiet on the cinder path without, and not a soul loomed through the darkness that now concealed the playing fields. Louise returned, caught up her figure-head, and made a dash for safety. Once inside Brontë garden she felt she had left the enemy's territory and was back in her own trenches. Yet matters were by no means settled. What was she to do with her trophy now she had got it? She could hardly walk into the house and display it to Miss Sheppard, neither could she leave it in the garden for all and sundry to see. Her resourceful brain suggested the tool-shed, so she hurried down the steps and behind the yew hedge. Fortunately the door was not kept locked, and she was able to enter. She put down the mascot with considerable relief, and examined it curiously by the light of her torch. The little wooden figure was about three feet high, and represented a classic female in white draperies with a wreath of laurel round her hair. Her

paint was rather battered, owing to exposure, but her name "Sappho" was still legible, and her lips smiled as inanely as when she had adorned the bow of some sailing-vessel of sixty years ago. Louise looked round for a safe place in which to bestow the lady, and finally put her underneath a table in the corner, covering her first with some straw, and then with a number of old strawberry nets. She piled some flower-pots in front, and decided that her trophy was very well concealed. Then she hurried back to the house; washed her hands, and removed the mud stains from her garments. She found most of Brontë assembled for a ping pong tournament.

"Tired of watching Gaskell's show?" she asked casually.

"Yes. Where have you been? We wanted you to play Joyce. It's too late now, she and Esmé are entered together," said Peggie, who with a list in her hand was acting umpire. "You can play Violet if you like."

"I don't mind in the least, thanks. I'd rather watch."

"Is that wretched bonfire out yet?"

"I really don't know."

"We've decided it's beneath us to look at it. It's a matter that ought to go to the school parliament."

Next day was Sunday, and all the girls went, as was the rule, to the little chapel which had been built for them within the grounds of the park. They sat according to their houses, and walked back in order, so had slight opportunity of conferring with other hostels, yet news flies fast, and before Brontë had regained the gates of its own garden, every girl in the line had





THE STOLEN MASCOT





heard the thrilling piece of information passed on in whispers :

“Gaskell has lost its mascot.”

Once indoors and able to break rank, the girls asked and answered many questions.

“Lost, did you say?”

“Stolen, they seem to think.”

“But who’d take it?”

“How should I know?”

“How wild they’ll be!”

“They’re simply furious!”

“Is it a burglar?”

“A rag more likely.”

“Their precious, darling mascot.”

“I think it just jolly well serves them right.”

Louise listened to these remarks with the innocent face of a baby-in-arms. She was not going to give her secret away. At first she had thought of telling Peggie, but she decided it was scarcely safe to do so. However much her cousin might surreptitiously sympathize with the practical joke, her official position would not allow her to aid and abet. Peggie had said: “If only I weren’t captain I’d——” But she *was* captain, and as such she certainly must not know what lay hidden in the tool-shed. A magnificent project had occurred to Louise, a plan of revenge on Gaskell calculated to make the rival house mourn in sackcloth and ashes. It would need confederates, however, and whom could she trust? She decided upon Joyce, Violet, and Rosamund, whose dormitory she shared, and who were inclined to be friendly. In her cubicle, sitting upon her

bed, they hatched a plot worthy of Guy Fawkes himself.

"It'll be such a surprise!"

"Won't they scream!"

"They'll never guess beforehand!"

"Be sure you don't let a soul know!"

Monday being a special holiday was occupied with half-term excursions. Some of the girls went "geologizing", as they called it, with the science mistress, to a quarry where there were rumors that fossils might be found, others were taken to the Baddesley Museum and Art Gallery, and a select number shared a char-a-banc and were conducted by Miss Penrose to view two abbeys and a cathedral. Everybody was back early on account of the bonfire, which was to be held immediately after tea. A magnificent pile of brushwood and old paraffin barrels had been erected in a vacant space, a table had been carried out, on which to place the fireworks, and posts erected where Catherine wheels could be fixed. Hall, the coachman, and Denham, the head gardener, were to help and act as assistants to Miss James, the science mistress, who was in charge of the display. An enormous guy, with straw-stuffed body and a grotesque mask for face, was placed in a chair set on poles, and was carried round the field escorted by a lantern procession of laughing attendants. A niche had been reserved for him in the bonfire, and he was removed from his litter and placed in position with much ceremony. Ten stewards, each with a large toffee tin strapped to her shoulder, paraded the ground like wandering pedlars, only their goods were supplied free

of charge to all. The whole school, head mistress, staff, students, and girls from all houses were collected to enjoy the fun, and formed a big, laughing interested crowd. A train of gunpowder ignited the bonfire, and soon the paraffin casks were blazing, and Guy Fawkes' body, well stuffed with crackers, was shooting sparks in all directions. Then rockets began to roar, and Catherine wheels to whiz round, and it seemed as if the stars were falling, and everyone called out "O-o-o-h!"

In the general mixture of hostels nobody missed Louise, Joyce, Violet, and Rosamund, but during the fireworks they vanished, and tearing back to Brontë they completed some arrangements which they had made earlier in the day, and presently issued from the tool-shed carrying Sappho, adorned with a green hat trimmed with flowers and feathers, and with a purple scarf round her shoulders. The girls had joined hands, as taught in the ambulance class, and had formed a temporary chair for the figure-head. They passed along at the back of the crowd till they neared the bonfire, then pushed their way into the circle of light.

"We've brought you another guy!" shouted Louise, exhibiting their burden.

Instantly a yell of horror arose from the Gaskellites, and twenty-five strong they rushed to the rescue of their mascot, tore it from the arms of the brigands, and rejoiced over its recovery. No regiment getting back its lost colors could have shown more frenzied excitement. The girls clustered round it hurraing, and appointed a body-guard to protect it until the festivities were over. Miss Penrose, evidently much

puzzled, was seen asking questions, but as the best of the rockets were now being let off all heads were turned upwards to watch.

It was only when the last sparks had died away, and each hostel had gone home to call-over that Peggie captured her cousin and catechized her.

"Lulu, tell me. Where did you get that mascot? I might have known it was you."

Louise looked at her with an angelic smile.

"There's a proverb I once heard: 'Don't ask me no questions and then you won't be told no fibs'. You said: 'if you hadn't been captain——' "

"Oh, you imp!"

"I don't expect you to thank me, all the same we're quits with Gaskell, and that's something to the good," said Louise, as she danced away.

"And something to the bad, for we haven't heard the end of it," Peggie called after her. "Oh, dear!" she continued to herself, "I feel like Henry II when he wished someone would murder Thomas à Becket and they took him at his word. I never expected Lulu would actually go to Gaskell and snatch Sappho. What will happen to-morrow I don't know. There'll be an inquiry, I suppose. After all, it's only a rag. It's not a very desperately wicked thing, it's—well—it's just Louise!"



## CHAPTER V

### *Humble Pie*

As Peggie had prophesied, there was an inquiry into "certain matters connected with Gaskell and Brontë on dates 3rd and 5th of November". Such at least was the official summons which, as captain of her house, she received from Barbara, and in answer to which she obediently presented herself. The "court martial" appointed for the occasion was an assembly of prefects, armed with the authority of the school and rather on their dignity.

"Miss Penrose spoke to me about it, and then left it to *us*," said Barbara. "She says we're to put down ragging. She won't have it. What I want to know is why Gaskell was having private fireworks on the 3rd, and why Brontë stole their mascot?"

Rachel, the representative of Gaskell, was thoroughly ready in defence of her hostel. She submitted that at the captains' meeting she had put forward a proposition for separate celebrations of Guy Fawkes' Day, and that her motion had been defeated, but she contended that that had nothing to do with the present case.

"We subscribed to the general fireworks and we came and watched them. We had a great pile of weeds in our garden which needed burning, and if we liked to



set them alight on Saturday, what was there to hinder us? Rockets? Why, it was Allie Austin's birthday, and her father sent her a box of fireworks. They came by motor-car on the morning of the 3rd, and they were let off in her special honor in the evening. We had our house matron's permission. Surely there is nothing against the rules in that?"

"Nothing on the outside but a great deal on the inside," frowned Barbara. "You really stole a march on the other houses, and had your fun to yourselves after all. Birthdays are convenient things. It's always somebody's birthday! Miss Andrews wouldn't have given you permission if she'd known the whole story. I think your meanness is unspeakable."

"And what about the mascot?" asked Rachel, turning the tables into the enemy's camp.

Here Peggie was called to give what evidence she could, and disclaiming any knowledge of the affair declared it to be merely a foolish rag got up by some of the junior members of the house. The figure of Sappho had not been injured in any way, and was now restored to its original position in Gaskell garden.

"You must keep a tight hand over those juniors," advised Barbara. "Don't let ragging begin. Give them an inch and they'll take an ell. I happen to know who was the chief offender, and I suggest that Louise Roper should write an apology to Gaskell."

"Yes, certainly, an apology," agreed the captains.

"You'll see it's done," said Barbara to Peggie. "I'll report to Miss Penrose that we've settled the matter

that way. She was very much distressed at the upset last night. 'Rowdy' was her word for it."

"It was the Gaskellites who made the rush," put in Peggie.

"We weren't going to see our mascot flung into the bonfire," interrupted Rachel fiercely.

"Louise wouldn't have done that."

"I wouldn't trust your precious cousin."

"Sh! Sh! No more of this," decreed Barbara. "Louise is to write an apology, and then the quarrel is patched up. I'm not going to listen to another word on either side."

Louise, especially among the younger and more unruly spirits of Brontë, was posing as a heroine. She told the story of her adventure over and over again to select audiences. She narrated, with many embellishments, her thrilling raid into Gaskell garden, and how she had only just escaped uncaught. Being puffed up with pride in her success, she jibbed at all idea of apology.

"But you've *got* to *do it*," persisted Peggie. "I tell you Barbara said so."

"Nobody can make this child do what she doesn't want. I'd be burnt in a bonfire first."

"Don't be silly. If you're going on in this way you'll get expelled. That's what'll happen to you. If you won't write the apology it will be reported to Miss Penrose, and, if you still refuse, your parents will be asked to remove you from the school. That's how they keep order here. It's the same for everybody. You

can't expect to belong to an army and do just as you like. Be a sport, Lu!"

Louise yielded sulkily, and went upstairs to fetch her blotting-pad.

"I'm not going to eat humble pie too utterly," she grumbled. Then her brow cleared and she began to scribble, smiling to herself the while.

"How's this?" she asked presently.

"Take again your little Sappho,  
With a very hearty laugh-o,  
Thank your stars we did not burn her,  
And be glad we did return her.  
As it seems her loss upset you,  
And we do not wish to fret you,  
Mopping fast our flowing eyes,  
We do now apologize.

You're laughing, Pegs. I can see it in your eyes, and your mouth is twitching. I often wish you weren't captain. You'd be far more fun."

"I'll make *you* twitch soon. Are you going to write this apology or not?"

"How will this suit your ladyship? 'Miss Roper desires to express her extreme compunction for the unfortunate accident which occurred on Monday evening, in the course of which, by an entire oversight, a valuable figure-head, the property of Gaskell House, was mistaken for a guy'."

"Here, give me your pad and your stilo," commanded Peggie. "I see I shall have to write the thing

for you, and you must copy it. I think it may be quite short.

“BRONTE HOUSE,  
“SOMERTON COLLEGE,

“I, Louise Roper, desire to offer my apologies to the members of Gaskell House for removing a wooden figure-head of Sappho from their garden on the evening of November 3rd.”

With a sour face, as one who tastes paraffin by mistake, Louise transcribed her document of penance, placed it in an envelope, and addressed it to Miss Rachel Arnold, Gaskell House, after which it was taken immediate possession of by Peggie, who sent it straight away to its destination. The Gaskellites returned no answer, but they reported the receipt of the apology to Barbara, who considered that the matter of the Guy Fawkes rag was now concluded. Officially indeed it might be crossed off the books, but that was not the end of it, especially at Brontë. Louise's wild spirits, having had a first fling, could not resist further ragging. In company with her room-mates, she began a series of practical jokes. They were harmless enough when played upon one another, but when they invaded other dormitories, the girls were loud in complaints. Helen Armstrong and Enid Wilkinson in particular were annoyed, and twitted Peggie with slackness for allowing such a state of affairs to creep in.

“You pet that cousin of yours,” said Helen. “If I were captain I'd soon make her behave herself.”



## Captain Peggie

"I never favor Louise at all," answered Peggie. "If I trace any of these tricks to her she'll take the consequences."

"Everybody knows she's at the bottom of them."

"I'll have another talk with her."

Peggie would not admit the fact before Helen and Enid, but privately she thought Louise was the stumbling-block of Brontë. She was a most difficult character to manage. Strictness, like a curb rein, seemed to drive her frantic, and she was ready to kick over the traces and risk expulsion with complacency.

"She wouldn't a bit mind being expelled," thought Peggie. "I know just what would happen. I can see the scene. Parents sent for. Aunt Lucy in hysterics in Miss Penrose's best arm-chair. Uncle Harold saying: 'Very well, then take her away'. Louise rather proud of herself and pleased at getting a holiday, and having a ripping time in London. It wouldn't do. It would be so bad for her. She must stay at Somerton at any price and learn what we mean by honor and *noblesse oblige*. If only she cared for Brontë more! Mother says she's fond of *me*! I can't flatter myself she really is, but at any rate I'm her cousin. I must do what I possibly can with her."

Peggie was trying to master the very difficult lesson that most of our blessings are home made. Opportunities come to all of us, but how few of us know how to use them. Fate puts soft clay into our hands, and our blundering, inexperienced fingers mould it into something either beautiful or ugly. It is always a great moment when our lives first touch those of others.



How is the contact going to affect these new souls whom we have met? Will some magnet in us attract all the good in them, and make them give out their best? Undoubtedly there are certain people whose atmosphere, like the sunshine, opens hard unripe buds that appear incapable of blossoming. We are apt to get what we look for in life, and those who are persuaded that flowers lie under the dead leaves are more likely to find them than those that trample ruthlessly along. But to have enough patience to wait till the primroses spring up demands certain qualifications for sainthood. Peggie might well be forgiven if she wished sometimes that her cousin had been sent to another school.

On the very next day Louise, whose pranks had begun by merely placing a Teddy-bear inside Violet's bed, outdid herself in sheer naughtiness. She was caught by Helen, red-handed, in the act of tying a string across the passage to trip up unwary feet.

"Hello! What are you doing here?" demanded Helen.

"Only a booby trap. Don't spoil it," giggled Louise.

"A booby trap! A death trap more likely. Can't you see anyone who fell over that would tumble downstairs? Take it away this minute. How dare you do such things? You might have killed somebody."

Pulling a rueful face, Louise wound up the string and put it in her pocket. Then she walked very slowly downstairs. It was only a quarter past two, and her time was free until three o'clock. As she sauntered into the sitting-room she met her cousin.

## Captain Peggie

"Pegs! I've nothing to do. Come out with me, won't you? Be a sport."

Peggie was sitting by the fire with her jersey on. She was shivering and looking rather miserable.

"I'm getting a cold," she vouchsafed. "Miss Sheppard says she's going to take my temperature."

"The best thing to cure a cold is a good brisk walk. I've often thrown them off in that way."

Peggie looked doubtfully at the damp, misty November atmosphere outside, and shivered again. Louise's cure seemed rather a risky experiment.

"Oh, come along! Don't stay moping by the fire. You're not generally a slacker."

To be called a slacker usually spurs people to their supreme efforts. Peggie put away her book and fetched hat and coat. She had wanted to talk with Louise, and this seemed too priceless an opportunity to be missed. The girls started across the fields intending to pass the farm, and come back through the wood. The grass was wet and the path in places was very muddy, yet a few late wild flowers still lingered on the banks, and there were berries in the hedges. They picked quite a pretty posy between them.

"We'll put it on the tea table to surprise Miss Croft," said Peggie. "She went into Cavell yesterday, and said they have lovely flowers there. Brontë mustn't be outdone."

"Always Brontë!" laughed Louise.

"Of course it's always Brontë. It's a tremendous thing to belong to a house and to be loyal to it. We

want Brontë to have the best record of all. Aren't you beginning to get proud of it?"

"Perhaps I am, a little."

"You'll be more than a little before you've finished. Wouldn't you like to do something to help the record?"

"I hadn't thought about it."

"Then *do* think. We're all either shoving Brontë up or pulling her down."

"And which am I doing?"

"Guess for yourself. Are monkey tricks likely to make Brontë's reputation?"

Louise put her hand in her pocket and fingered a certain piece of string.

"I suppose not," she grunted.

"No one minds a little fun, but things can go beyond a joke sometimes, and continual ragging gets tiresome. How would *you* like it if every day your boots were missing, and your exercise books hidden, or your drawers turned upside down?"

"I'd raise the earth!"

"Well, how do other people feel? Remember at Brontë we're like a big family, and we all have to think of each other's feelings. If we're nasty among ourselves we can't be united enough to help on our house."

"You and your Brontë!"

"My Brontë and *yours* too! It's not mine alone."

"You're captain."

"What's the use of a captain unless everyone does her own share? It's like a sheepdog without the sheep."

"And you're trying to bark me into the fold,"

laughed Louise. "I'm a slacker, Pegs, but look here, old sport, to please *you*, and well, perhaps—I won't say 'to help' but 'not to hinder' Brontë—I'll pull myself together and be such a haloed saint you'll want to build a niche for me in the garden and call the house 'St. Louise's' instead."

"Don't fancy you'll be canonized just yet. But I should be so glad to feel I'd someone among the junior girls whom I could depend upon. When first you arrived at school you said I must let you know if I wanted a lieutenant."

"I remember."

"Well, suppose I make you my informal lieutenant? It's not an official post, only quite a private one, just between us two. Will you swear allegiance to Brontë?"

"If you like."

"Your hand on it."

"Here you are."

"Pagets and Ropers don't go back on their word, so we're pledged."

"It's as tight as an African blood-brotherhood."

The girls had walked rapidly and were nearing the farm. As they passed the gate Peggie glanced at her watch.

"We've quite five minutes to spare. I shall have time to run in and see Mrs. Atkins about the crinoline she offered to lend for the 'dramatics'. I believe she has an ancient bonnet as well, and some other old things. Come along, Lu!"

It was a hasty visit. Mrs. Atkins, called from the kitchen, promised anything she could find in the way



of her grandmother's wardrobe, and offered to send them to the school in a parcel.

"You'll be having an invitation to the entertainment, I know," said Peggie. "You'll be amused to see the clothes worn, won't you? Thanks so much. We must tear away now to afternoon school."

It is unpleasant work to hurry when you have a bad cold coming on. The wood was dank and chilly, and the long grass there was very wet. At the risk of being late for botany class Peggie went into Brontë to change her soaked stockings. She was pounced upon and detained by Miss Sheppard.

"Peggie! You ought not to have been out. I said I was going to take your temperature. Go to the dining-room and sit by the fire, and I shall fetch my thermometer now. You have a terrible cold. I don't think you're fit to be in school this afternoon."

Sneezing violently, Peggie obeyed, and presently Miss Sheppard returned, shaking down the mercury in her clinical thermometer. The result of her examination was 102° and she looked concerned.

"In case it should be influenza you'd better go straight across to the sanatorium," she decided. "Nurse is there with Elsie Moseley. Pack your night-dress and dressing-gown and brush and comb and sponge. Is your bag in your room? No? Then I can lend you mine. Be quick, because I want to get you to bed as soon as possible. I'll take you across myself. You were a silly girl to go out this afternoon. I left you snug and warm with a book by the fire."

Peggie did not wait to explain the wherefore of her



## Captain Peggie

walk. Miss Sheppard was fussing to get her away, fetching a handbag and helping to fling in a few invalid necessities, and wrapping a Shetland shawl round her throat.

"Now don't talk," commanded the matron. "The less damp air you get into your throat the better. A girl of your age ought to have had more sense than to ramble in wet fields with such a cold."

Poor Peggie by this time was feeling anything but fit, and, arrived at the sanatorium, found it really rather a relief to undress and be put to bed with a hot-water bottle. It was nicer to shiver under the blankets than in the botany class, though sometimes she felt so hot she longed to throw all her coverings on to the floor. The sanatorium was always kept well aired and ready for cases, and the nurse in charge was a favorite with the girls, so feeling she had done everything possible for the patient and was leaving her in excellent hands, Miss Sheppard went to the office to report the matter and returned to Brontë.

Everyone was surprised to miss Peggie at tea-time.

"She certainly had an awful cold, I noticed that myself," said Joyce, who was sitting next to Louise. "What possessed her to take a walk?"

"Oh, we just went for a stroll together," answered Louise uneasily, remembering the coercion she had used to make her cousin stir from the fire. "By the by, we went into the farm, and do you know, Mrs. Atkins has promised to lend us the loveliest old crinoline and a bonnet for the tableaux. Isn't it splendid?"

"You called at the farm! Sh! Sh!" whispered Joyce.

"Why sh! sh!"

"Because it's out of bounds."

"I didn't know that."

"Then you ought to. What a Gubbins you are. Look here, you'd better not go about proclaiming what you've just told me, or you'll find yourself in trouble. Mum's the word if you'll take my advice. Have you blabbed to anyone else?"

"No."

"Then don't." And Joyce helped herself to cake, passed her cup for more tea, and put an end to the conversation.

As the girls were filing out of the room Helen Armstrong tapped Louise on the shoulder.

"I want a word with you," she said briefly. "Come upstairs to my dormitory at once."

"Why, what's the matter?"

"You know as well as I do."

"I don't."

"Louise Roper, don't tell fibs. Unless you come instanter to No. 3 it will be worse for you. There's something that very much needs explanation."

## CHAPTER VI

### *Deputy Helen*

Full of wonder and strongly inclined to rebel, Louise nevertheless followed Helen, who called to Enid on the stairs and led the way to her cubicle in Dormitory 3. Here the two elder girls settled themselves as inquisitors on the bed, with Louise, like a prisoner at the bar, seated on a chair in front of them.

"What do you mean by setting a booby trap on the landing?" began Helen sternly.

"Why, we had that out this afternoon. I took it away."

"You did not."

"I did. You saw me. Besides, here's the string in my pocket."

"You took it away while I was looking, but you went back and set it again."

"Oh, I didn't!"

"It's no use denying it, for Enid nearly tripped over it. Didn't you, Enid?"

"Almost. I only just saved myself in time. If I hadn't I should be in the sanatorium with a broken leg or worse."

"You see it's no use pretending it wasn't there, Louise," added Helen.

"I'm not pretending anything. I only say I didn't put it there."

"Nonsense! You can't climb out of a scrape like that."

"I wasn't in the house. I'd gone for a walk."

"Oh, I daresay. Any excuse will do."

"I'm telling the truth."

"Who should put it there except you, Louise?" broke in Enid. "Everybody in Brontë knows that it is you who plays these abominable tricks."

"And I caught you," nodded Helen.

"Yes, and I took the string away and went straight out for a walk. What time was it when Enid nearly fell?"

"About half-past three?"

"I was far away in the fields at the time."

"Can you bring two witnesses to prove that you were not in Brontë at half-past three?"

"Easily! At least—well—I'm not quite sure."

"There's the prep bell," said Enid, rising hastily from the bed. "We shall have to go now."

"Don't think we've finished with you though, Louise," snorted Helen. "I mean to sift this business to the bottom, so I warn you. I shall report it to Barbara, and it will probably be brought before the School Parliament. You're not going to get off scot-free."

They hurried downstairs to fetch books and papers, and Louise, who was due to practise on the piano, followed with a crimson face. She was in a tremendous dilemma. There were two witnesses who could clear



her at once from the accusation of resetting the booby trap. Peggie and Mrs. Atkins, yet if she brought them forward, she must acknowledge the visit to the farm. Did Peggie know it was forbidden ground? Had she deliberately broken bounds? Louise had not forgotten the occasion when they took the meerkat to the stables. Helen had caught them then, and had seemed sceptical when Peggie protested innocence. It certainly would not do to let censorious Helen know that her captain had again, wittingly or unwittingly, transgressed the school rules.

“Besides which it would seem too mean for words to give Pegs away while she’s lying ill at the sanatorium and can’t speak up for herself,” thought Louise. “They’d set her down guilty straight away. I shall be blamed for that booby trap, but I can’t help it. By the by, I wonder who did it? Peggie called me her lieutenant. I’ll be loyal to her at any rate. No one shall have a chance of throwing stones at the captain if I can stop them. I told Pegs I’d help her out of a hole if she ever fell into one, and I mean it. It’s bad luck for me. I think the pixies must be playing tricks. I hope nothing else is going to happen.”

But on the very next morning something else did happen. Louise, three-quarters dressed, broke the pin off her brooch, and wishing to get her best brooch from her locked up “valuables” box, found she had left the key in the pocket of her jersey in the cloak-room. So down she sped, and was just about to whirl upstairs again when Helen Armstrong, appearing from

the sitting-room, seized her roughly by the arm and pulled her back.

"So it was you! I might have known that," said Helen. "Anything more disgraceful I've never seen in my life. I don't know what you deserve."

"Why, what's the matter now?" asked Louise resentfully, trying to wrench herself free from Helen's ungentle hand. "I'm sure I've been doing nothing."

"Nothing! Do you call *that* nothing?" declared Helen, pointing dramatically into the hall. "I call it a distinct insult to Brontë."

Louise's eyes followed the direction of the wrathful hand, and blinked in surprise. There was a small alcove in the wall which held a plaster bust of Athene, and round that beautiful and classic Greek mouth were—horrible to relate—smears of strawberry jam! With Louise the humorous was always uppermost, and at this aspect of the immortal goddess of wisdom she burst into uncontrollable laughter, and laughed even while Helen, thoroughly angry, tried to shake her.

"She looks—so—funny!" cackled Louise. "Let me alone, Helen. I didn't do it."

"Then who did? We never had vulgar tricks before *you* came to Brontë. And what were you doing downstairs half dressed?"

"I came to fetch my key."

"It looks very suspicious. I shall have to inquire into it. Go upstairs now and fetch me a sponge and a towel. Miss Croft mustn't see this."

"I'll do that, though I tell you again it wasn't I who put on the jam."

## Captain Peggie

Together the two girls very carefully washed and dried Athene's classic face, removing all traces of the outrage, after which Louise retired to finish her toilet, only just completing it before first bell rang. The moment breakfast was over Enid Wilkinson went straight to the house mistress.

"Will Peggie be away for long, Miss Croft, please?" she asked.

"Ten days or a fortnight I'm afraid. The doctor says it's certainly influenza, though I hear she seems better this morning."

"Then may we have Helen as deputy-captain while Peggie is ill?" urged Enid officiously. "I think there ought to be someone in charge."

"Yes, it would certainly be wise to appoint a deputy," agreed Miss Croft. "I'll speak to Helen about it. She has been at Somerton longer than anyone else except Peggie."

It was an opportunity which Helen did not refuse. She had always longed to be captain, and thought there were many things in Brontë which could be improved. By special permission of Miss Sheppard, with whom she was a favorite, she took temporary possession of Peggie's bedroom, and installed herself there very complacently during the rest-time between two and three o'clock. Now that she was invested with authority she meant to use it and to keep a tight hand over Brontë. She had already spoken to Barbara and asked her to call a meeting of the School Parliament at the earliest opportunity, a severe measure which was only resorted to when any desperate matter needed airing. Having

transferred her own sheets and blankets from her cubicle she went to bed that night in the captain's room. Now Dormitory 1 and Dormitory 2 were close at hand, and rather separated from Nos. 3, 4, 5, and 6. The occupants were younger girls who had only come up this term from the preparatory houses. They were quite unaware that Helen had taken up her quarters so near to them, and were indeed congratulating themselves that they were out of earshot of all authority. Very early in the morning they awoke, and still clad in their pajamas commenced a pillow fight. It was held in No. 1, as being most remote from other rooms, and the occupants of No. 2 came in armed with their pillows. Everyone who has any experience of this form of amusement knows it is not generally conducted in silence. At first they were careful to subdue their voices, but as the fun waxed they forgot precautions and were soon chattering like the builders of the Tower of Babel. In the very thick of the fray, when pillows were flying fast, the door suddenly opened and Helen, in a scarlet dressing-gown, made her appearance. Never were eight girls so thoroughly surprised! They dropped their weapons on the floor, and those who had beds jumped into them. The rest, finding no retreat, stood huddled together rather abashed.

"What a disgraceful noise! You woke me up," began Helen impatiently. "I can hear every sound in the captain's room."

Eight conscious sinners exchanged looks.

"We didn't know you were sleeping there," said Nora.



## Captain Peggie

"I daresay you didn't, but I am, and I tell you I don't mean to stand any nonsense while I'm deputy. I shall have to report this. Pick up your pillows and go back to your own dormitory, you four. Taking advantage when you thought nobody was in charge. Miss Croft will be very sorry to hear about it."

Helen retreated like an indignant whirlwind, blowing the occupants of No. 2 before her. She left rueful faces behind.

"I'd no idea anybody was in Peggie's room," lamented Lilian.

"Helen's worse than Pegs." (Kathleen.)

"We shall have to be so prim and proper." (Jennie.)

"What a nuisance." (Nora.)

Helen, after talking things over with Enid, had decided that she could not inform Miss Croft of breaches of rules that had been committed before her investiture as deputy-captain, because that would be considered sneaking by the girls, but all infringement of discipline afterwards certainly came within the range of her duties. The occupants of No. 1 and No. 2 were duly reported, and received a tremendous lecture from Miss Croft and, what was much worse, the punishment of being sent to bed for a week at 7.45, immediately after supper, thereby missing evening recreation. The prospect quelled their spirits considerably.

"Just as well to make an example of them," confided Helen to her chum. "I hope other dormitories will take warning. I think we shall settle Louise once and for all to-morrow afternoon. I'm determined to put

down this ragging. I've served notices on every girl in Brontë to attend."

The School Parliament at Somerton was an old-established institution. It consisted of the prefects, of the nine captains, and of eighteen other members, two of whom were elected by each house. These constituted a kind of tribunal to discuss any matters connected with the school, and to sit in judgment upon cases requiring trial. It was a combined "Witenagemote" and law courts, though so modern in its methods that it might be more fitly termed a "House of Women". Whoever was served with a notice to attend was required to be present, and to disobey the order would mean defying the entire traditions of Somerton College. Owing to a special rehearsal, which the seniors had arranged for Thursday, it was not possible for Parliament to meet until Friday, but meantime Helen threw out mysterious hints of what certain people, who had not been behaving as they ought, might expect to happen to them, reducing the whole of Brontë to a state bordering on consternation. It was unusual indeed for all the girls in a house to be summoned *en bloc*, and they could only conclude that some very desperate charge would be brought against them. They considered Helen was responsible for raising the trouble, and it did not increase her popularity. Helen was a girl who had many good points, but whose virtues were apt to run to seed. Naturally masterful, the least exercise of authority made her domineering in the extreme. She liked to order the younger ones about, and was indeed somewhat of a Jack-in-office. She lacked

tact in her dealings with others, and tried to carry everything with a big, bullying manner. Being a "new broom" she determined to "sweep clean", and to show everybody that she was more capable of maintaining order than the real captain of the hostel.

Morning work at Somerton was from nine till twelve, after which organized games were played until one o'clock as part of the school curriculum, every girl being required to take part, unless she had a special exemption for "indisposition". On Thursday, just as Louise had fetched her hockey stick and was about to join her team, one of the juniors ran up to her and thrust a note into her hand.

"Old Hall asked me to give it you," explained Nellie. "I had my riding lesson this morning, and he said he wanted to send this to Miss Roper, so I offered to take it. Hope it's good news. Ta-ta!"

Louise opened the letter with a certain foreboding, which was justified as she read the contents.

"DEAR MISS,

"I am sorry to have to tell you but I cannot keep your little foreign animal any longer. Miss Penrose has taken to poultry, and wants to put a pair of bantams inside the rabbit hutch. Will you please come to-day and remove your pet or I must ask Miss Penrose what to do with it. I enclose account for its keep.

"Respectfully Yours,

"Matthew Hall."

On a separate sheet of paper was written:

"To care of one African animal, 7 weeks at 2s. 14s."

Poor Louise! She stuffed the letter in her pocket and ran to the hockey pitch, where she played an exceedingly bad game. Why did things always seem to conspire against her? She had trouble enough on hand already. She was beginning heartily to wish that she had never brought Dongo to school. She had made secret visits to see him, in defiance of bounds, and in imminent danger of discovery. He was manifestly unhappy in the rabbit hutch, he looked thin and pining, and his coat was in poor condition. And now she must remove him to-day. How could she possibly find a fresh home for him? And the bill! Louise in her innocence had supposed Hall was keeping him out of kindness. She had never expected to be charged two shillings a week on account of Dongo. Fourteen shillings would take all that was left of her term's pocket money except a threepenny bit and two pennies. It was absolutely disastrous. When dinner was over she unlocked her valuables box, took out what was needed, and managed to slip away unobserved to the stables. Hall was kind, and said "Thank you, missie" for the money, but he was entirely firm on the subject of parting with Dongo.

"My missis is quite afraid of him and won't have him in the house," he explained, "and I've nowhere else to put him now the rabbit hutch is wanted. Hadn't you best tell Miss Penrose? I should."

"No! No! Give him to me, I'll find some place for him. Then at the end of the term I'll take him home. How shall I carry him? Why, under my coat like I did before. He knows me. Come along, darling."



Louise buttoned her jersey over her pet, and dodging two of the prefects who were coming for riding lessons, escaped from the danger zone and made her way back to Brontë, where she went to her dormitory and drew the curtains of her cubicle. She wanted to have a private talk with Dongo. He had not forgotten his mistress, but weeks of residence in a rabbit hutch had made him nervous and frightened at being carried into strange surroundings. He trembled as she stroked him, and looked alert as if apprehensive of danger.

"Don't you like the nasty cold British climate then," she cooed. "Do you wish you were back in Africa, best-beloved? I'd take you to-morrow if I could. Shall we go together—you and I? You shan't live in a horrid rabbit hutch any more. You understand every word I say, don't you?"

Thumping footsteps along the landing interrupted this love-making, together with a loud voice calling "Louise! Louise!"

Dongo's mistress glanced round in agony to find safe cover for her pet, and on the spur of the moment dropped him into the clothes basket and put on the lid. Exactly one second later Helen entered the room.

"What are you doing here, Louise?" she said, pulling back the curtains of the cubicle. "Why aren't you downstairs? You know we're rehearsing those folk dances. Miss Croft sent me to fetch you."

"I thought I was allowed to do as I liked between two and three," objected Louise, rising unwillingly.

"Not when we're having rehearsals. Everybody's

expected to take part. Come along! Don't be a slacker."

It was impossible to refuse. Policed by Helen, Louise left the dormitory, hoping Dongo would settle himself inside the clothes basket and go to sleep. She took her part in the folk dances, but at the earliest available opportunity she ran upstairs again. Alas! the clothes basket was tilted over, and lay on its side empty. The too accomplished Dongo had made his escape. Louise hunted everywhere, under the beds and under the wardrobes, but there was not so much as the tip of his tail to be seen. She searched again after tea, but with no better success. She went into preparation full of anxiety. Where could Dongo have hidden himself? If he had found his way into the garden he would be lost, and would probably die of damp and cold on a November evening.

As the girls came out of the sitting-room after preparation they almost ran into an excited little group in the hall. The cook, looking much agitated, was pouring forth a tale to Miss Sheppard, while one of the housemaids kept chiming in with her version of affairs.

"Half a dozen eggs eaten clean out of their shells and the rest broken."

"The biggest rat I ever saw in my life!"

"What am I to do about supper?"

"It jumped off the table and ran."

"There isn't any ham left."

"We shall have to set a rat trap."

Louise's heart almost stood still. Dongo was un-

doubtedly at large, and had found his way to the larder. Meerkats are very fond of eggs; he had evidently availed himself of his opportunity and had disposed of Brontë's supper. Worse than that—he had been mistaken for a rat and a trap might be laid for him. Another frantic search, conducted with great difficulty, resulted in nothing. At bed-time there was still no trace of him. At ten minutes to nine Louise, brushing her hair in her cubicle, suddenly heard a series of piercing shrieks. She rushed on to the landing in company with girls from other dormitories, and found it was Helen who had raised the outcry.

"The rat's in my bedroom!" she proclaimed. "I saw it run across the floor. Such a big one. It went under the dressing-table and I ran. Oh! I say! Here it is now."

Something small and dark was rapidly scuttling along the landing, and at its approach there was a mad stampede into dormitories. Helen bolted into No. 3 and jumped on the nearest bed.

"It's following us," she shouted. "There it is. Oh! can't somebody come and shoot it."

The spectacle of the deputy-captain of Brontë standing upon a bed in abject terror was scarcely dignified, though everybody was too agitated to notice.

Louise had slipped in, and kneeling down reached a long arm under a wardrobe. She grabbed Dongo, drew him out, and carried him to the landing, coming face to face with Miss Croft, who had hurried upstairs at the sound of the commotion.

"What have you there, Louise? Oh! So this is the rat, is it?"

Poor little Dongo, frightened out of his life, with his heart thumping sixteen to the dozen, lay crouching against his mistress's neck. Miss Croft stroked the heaving fur gently.

"I spent my childhood in South Africa, and I had two meerkats as pets," she said. "Bring him downstairs, Louise, and we'll find a place to put him. Go to bed the rest of you. This is no rat. You're perfectly safe."

Louise declared that she could never forget, to the end of her life, how kind Miss Croft was to Dongo. She found a large apple hamper and some straw, made him a comfortable nest inside, and tied the lid with cords to prevent his escape.

"We can't keep him here, Louise," she said. "My sister lives at Baddesley, and is coming to see me tomorrow. Shall I ask her to take him home for the rest of the term? She used to love our meerkats in Africa, and she'd give him what he needs. The rabbit hutch was not a very suitable place for him, poor little fellow!"

"The rabbit hutch! How did you know?"

Miss Croft smiled.

"I was at the stables one day and I happened to see him, and, of course, I guessed at once who must have brought him to school. There's no other girl from South Africa here. I used to go sometimes to talk to him and take him titbits. He would let me stroke him, and was quite friendly."



## Captain Peggie

"Oh! It wasn't out of bounds for *you*."

"No, but it is for *you*, so we must have no more of this, Louise. My sister shall take him away to-morrow, and I'll ask her to meet you at the station on the day you go home, and have him in a wooden box ready for travelling. He's quite happy now, so you must leave him and go to bed."

"Thank you just fifteen million times," sighed Louise. "I thought he'd be caught in a rat trap to-night."

"That would have been a misfortune. Don't you see how impossible it is to keep pets at school? The rule was made with very good reason. If two hundred and forty girls each brought an animal we should have to build a zoo. Next time you want to break a rule have a little imagination, and think what would happen if everyone broke it, then ask yourself why *you* should be favored above other people. In community life we have to learn to share and share alike, and even a matter such as this means that you were trying to take a special advantage over others who would equally like to keep pets. Think of it in that way, Louise. Good night."

## CHAPTER VII

### *The School Parliament*

On Friday afternoon, punctually at two o'clock, the School Parliament assembled in the recreation hall, which was especially reserved for the purpose, and the doors defended against all unauthorized intruders. Each house had sent its captain and its two elected representatives, and these took their places upon the platform. The rest of Brontë sat in a clump upon chairs below. They were very injured girls and they whispered among themselves.

"It's all Helen's fuss."

"What's she hauled us here for?"

"Why weren't the other houses summoned?"

"We're losing our free time."

"And I wanted to make Christmas presents."

"Pauline's brought her knitting."

"I wish I'd brought mine."

"Connie'll stand up for us."

"Yes, but Enid won't, she's nothing but Helen's henchman now."

"Pity we elected her."

The undercurrent of talk came to an abrupt end as Barbara, who was chairwoman, prime minister, and judge combined, opened the proceedings, As in duty

bound, she addressed herself to the members of Parliament, but she kept an eye on the group beneath to see that they were duly listening.

"This meeting has been specially called," she began, "at the request of one or two of our representatives whom we need not name." (Sniffs from Brontë, and murmurs of "*We know*".) "It seems that in one of our houses the discipline has apparently grown rather lax, and several things have occurred lately that are not in accordance with our traditions. It was a choice as to whether to refer matters to the house-mistress or to bring them before the School Parliament. We decided that it was better, if we could, to settle any trouble for ourselves. It is to discuss questions like this that the Parliament exists. As you will all guess, the business is with Brontë, and I will ask the deputy-captain of the house to make a statement."

Helen, with a rather consequential manner, rose and cleared her throat. She had a voice ready made for a committee, and was not afflicted with shyness. She gave the impression that she was destined by a partial providence for a public platform, and that she would hold her own there with a thorough contempt for what Carlyle calls "the fool multitude".

"As, owing to the illness of the captain, I have been appointed deputy, and in that capacity have come up against several serious matters, I feel it is only my duty to ask for an inquiry to be held. There has arisen lately in our house a very undesirable element of ragging, of such a nature that, for the general safety, it is necessary to use a firm hand and put it down. Some

of these cases occurred before I was deputy, and for this reason I should not report them to the house mistress, but I wish to say that it is perfectly in order to refer them to this meeting, where any girl is licensed to bring an accusation if she can prove it. I will now call on Enid Wilkinson to give some evidence."

Enid had a good deal to say. She poured out a highly colored account of how she had come along the landing and nearly tripped over a piece of string which had been stretched across the head of the stairs, and was fastened with drawing-pins on either side to the skirting board. Had she not noticed it she would have fallen downstairs, and would probably have received most serious injuries, or have been killed outright. She did not actually see anybody set this booby trap, but suspicion pointed to Louise Roper, for a reason which Helen would herself explain.

Then Helen took up the tale, and told how she had found Louise, half an hour earlier, in the very act of fixing the string in position, had warned her how extremely dangerous it was, and insisted upon her taking it away.

"She seemed unwilling to do so and annoyed at being discovered. As Louise is the instigator of all this ragging at Brontë we can only conclude that she came back and reset the string," finished Helen.

Hardly any of the girls had heard of this incident. It was not the kind of joke that appealed to them, and they stared at Louise in strong disapproval.

"Why, it's an absolutely hooligan rag," said Barbara.

"A girl capable of that isn't fit to be at Somerton. She



ought to be in a reformatory. It's the sort of trick played by anyone with very low intelligence and a strong strain of malicious feeling, the kind of thing the village idiot does until people complain and he's packed off to a lunatic asylum. And to set it again after being warned about the danger! This is a most serious accusation. Stand up, Louise Roper. What have you got to say for yourself?"

With a scared white face Louise obeyed.

"I set the string the first time, when Helen found me, and I'm *very* sorry. I never thought of anyone falling downstairs, and I didn't know how dangerous it was. If the trap was there later on *I* didn't set it; I was in the fields then."

"Oh, you want to prove an alibi," said Barbara, who as judge affected legal terms. "Can you get two reliable witnesses to guarantee that you were somewhere else at the time the offence is said to have been committed?"

"I—I'm afraid I can't."

"Then your alibi falls to the ground. Sit down while we discuss the matter."

The members of Parliament on the platform drew their chairs together and talked in low voices, coming very soon to a conclusion however. Barbara proclaimed their decision:

"This meeting wishes to pass a resolution strongly condemning the conduct of Louise Roper. Her action in resetting the string is 'not proven', but considering that she had invented the scheme it seems likely, especially as

she takes no pains to prove her innocence. We should like to say——”

“Excuse me,” interrupted Helen. “Before you pass the vote of censure there’s one other charge to be brought against Louise, and perhaps it would be well to deal with the two together.”

“Certainly. What is this second charge? Who brings it?”

It was Helen herself who was the accuser, and she narrated how she had found the bust of Athene profaned with strawberry jam, and had caught Louise wandering about half dressed in the hall before breakfast; a most suspicious circumstance. The judge and jury on the platform looked grave. The weight of evidence seemed to be accumulating.

“Had she any excuse to offer?” asked Barbara.

“Oh, plenty of excuses as usual!”

“I didn’t do it! I *didn’t!*” declared Louise hotly, rising in her own defence. “Helen has no right to say so. I believe it was one of those Gaskellites who did it in revenge.”

“In revenge for what?” asked Barbara sharply.

“For—well—for that business of their mascot,” Louise looked rather shamefaced. “They said they would pay us out.”

“Oh! What day did this strawberry jam affair happen?” said Connie, who seemed suddenly to wake up.

“On Wednesday morning.”

“Well, I was looking out of my bedroom window when I was dressing, and I certainly saw Daisy Gordon

of Gaskell running across our lawn. I mentioned it at the time to Dorothy. I said: 'Hello! what's that kid doing in our garden?' It may have some bearing on the case."

Everybody at once looked at Ruth Hamerton, Mabel Kirk, and Rachel Arnold, who were the representatives of Gaskell present on the platform. The three conferred hastily together.

"We know nothing of the matter ourselves, but we'll make inquiries about it," Rachel replied.

"Time's getting on," said Barbara, looking at her wrist watch. "We can't convict anybody on suspicion alone, so we'd better leave this business of the statue and go back to the resolution. I say again that we all strongly condemn the conduct of Louise Roper and call her a disgrace to her house. I should like to take this opportunity of telling the girls at Brontë that ragging has got to be stopped. We're not going to tolerate it. I hope the members of Gaskell will take warning too, and nip it in the bud if it begins there."

"As deputy-captain I shall do my best," put in Helen hastily, "but it's hard to pull a house together when it's been so neglec——"

"When *what*?" asked Barbara, staring her straight in the eyes.

"Oh, nothing!"

"You surely don't mean any reflection upon the captain of the house?"

"Of course not!"

"I'm glad to know. Peggie Paget happens to be a friend of mine."

The meeting broke up at this point, and the girls dispersed to their various classes. There was plenty of matter for conversation, and on the way back to tea at 4.20 Connie and Dorothy compared notes indignantly.

"Helen's the very limit. Making out Brontë was going to the dogs until *she* took charge."

"She reminded me of Mark Antony, insinuating what she daren't say outright."

"I wish Peggie were back."

"So do I. She doesn't boss round like Helen, but she makes a nicer feeling in the house. She *asks* people to stop doing things where Helen threatens. Heaps of girls behave decently because they like her."

"The fable of the sun and the wind," laughed Dorothy. "We've got a decidedly easterly gale blowing at present."

"And the sun won't come out until Pegs is declared free of infection and toddles back from the sanatorium," agreed Connie.

Among the younger girls the tide of popular opinion turned against Louise. She had brought the house into trouble, and had caused Brontë to receive a public reprimand. The vote of censure from the School Parliament was a deep humiliation. Even the very girls who had helped to play the tricks now disclaimed them, and laid all the blame on Louise.

"I always told her she'd get into trouble some day," said Violet.

"It was she who started ragging." (Rosamond.)

"We never did it before." (Joan.)



## Captain Peggie

"I was quite tired of it." (Betty.)

"Nightingale and Cavell will crow over us no end."  
(Joyce.)

"Gaskell had a nasty smack though." (Nora.)

"That doesn't set *us* straight." (Kathleen.)

"I vote we show Louise what we think of her."  
(Lilian.)

"She deserves it." (Jeanie.)

"Here she comes." (Janet.)

"Then quick! I'll tell you what to do."

The girls separated into two groups, one on each side of the door of the hostel. To enter Louise must pass between them. She came briskly up the drive carrying her books. As she ran up the steps her schoolfellows greeted her with an outburst of booing and hissing. She stopped, glanced for a moment at the hostile faces like a young lion-cub at bay, then holding herself proudly upright she walked slowly into Brontë. Poor Louise! Though she would not show lack of spirit before the others she was really on the verge of tears. Was there nobody to give her a helping hand? If only Peggie was here. But no, Peggie herself might be involved in trouble, and after Helen's hints about slackness it would never do for the captain of the house to be accused of breaking bounds. There seemed no other way but to bear an unjust portion of blame. As Louise went upstairs she passed her cousin's room, the door was open and it was empty, so for a moment she went in. It seemed easier to be loyal to Peggie in her own sanctum among all her pictures and private possessions.

"I said if Pegs was ever in a hole I'd help her out," she repeated. But the cost! Under all her flippant, don't-care manner Louise was extremely sensitive. To be the outcast of Brontë hurt her desperately. Was it worth staying in a place where she was so misunderstood and so unappreciated? Should she run away and go home? She had no money to pay her railway fare. Should she write to her father and ask him to come and fetch her? After the letter which she had sent early in the term to her mother, perhaps he would refuse to believe her. In any case if he arrived at the school Miss Penrose would make a full inquiry, and everything would be bound to come out. For Peggie's sake—no!

On the mantelpiece of the captain's room were some of her cousin's personal belongings, in the middle a beautiful photogravure of "The Light of the World", and on either side mottoes framed in passe-partout. It was the one on the right that attracted Louise. She read it through slowly.

"But all through life I see a cross,  
Where sons of God yield up their breath.  
There is no gain except by loss,  
There is no life except by death,  
There is no vision but by faith,  
Nor glory but by bearing shame,  
Nor justice but by taking blame,  
And that eternal passion saith,  
Be emptied of glory, and right and name."

Taking blame was the hardest thing in the world for a proud girl to bear. It would be hateful to have to

## Captain Peggie

sit at tea among all that disagreeable crew. The bell was ringing now.

"I wish Mother would give me a photograph of 'The Light of the World' for Christmas," she said half aloud as she ran down the stairs.

For more than a week Louise lived the life of an outcast at Brontë. Her companions spoke only when necessary, and avoided her as much as possible. She took it stoically, not letting them know how much it hurt her, but the time seemed very long.

On the fourteenth day after the commencement of her illness, Peggie, well nursed and fortified by tonics, returned from the sanatorium. She had been allowed no disturbing school news during her absence, and it was a complete surprise to her to hear of all the events that had happened. At the earliest opportunity she had a private talk with her cousin. Peggie was tactful, and instead of at once accusing her she led up to the subject, and let Louise pour out a full account of her side of the affair.

"You say you set the string and took it away when Helen told you, and that afterwards you said you were sorry. So far so good. But what about the string which Enid found?"

"I didn't put that. I was out with you in the fields. Don't you remember?"

"Of course I remember that walk. Can you prove the time? Were you out when Enid nearly tripped?"

"We went immediately after I saw Helen, and we only got back just before three."

"Then you silly girl! Why didn't you tell them so, and prove it?"

"How could I, Pegs?"

"Why not?"

"We went into the farm."

"Well?"

"It's out of bounds."

"It was certainly not out of bounds that day, because Miss Penrose had told me to call and ask Mrs. Atkins for the crinoline. Lulu! you never thought I should deliberately take you out of bounds? Were you trying to shield me? Oh, my dear! What a horrible mess and tangle the whole thing has been."

"Then we were allowed to go to the farm?" gasped Louise.

"I was specially sent, and as captain I had the right to take you with me. We'll soon clear this matter up. You certainly shan't be under a false accusation any longer. I'll speak to the girls after supper."

A special meeting, called in the sitting-room during recreation, sat and listened attentively to Peggie's version of the affair.

"We're quite willing to take your word for it," said Helen, "and as Louise has apologized for the original booby trap she may consider herself out of the scrape. What I want to know is who set the second trap, and who is responsible for the outrage on Athene?"

At this several younger girls stood up, but allowed Joyce to be spokeswoman.

"We're almost sure Daisy Gordon did that. The Gaskellites have been joking so much about strawberry



jam and triumphing over us, that there's really hardly any doubt about it."

"So we may acquit Louise of that charge?" asked Peggie, looking round the room. "Hands up, please all who agree."

The favorable verdict was universal. Even Helen uplifted her arm, though she could not help adding:

"We haven't got to the bottom of who set the second booby trap."

"As regards that," answered Captain Peggie, "it is certain it must have been done by a girl who is at present in this room. I hope that she's feeling so unutterably mean and contemptible, and so thoroughly ashamed of herself, that her own conscience will punish her for letting an innocent person be blamed in her place. I think it will be better to make no more inquiries; we have cleared Louise, and it seems wiser now to bring the whole affair to an end. Some of you have had a very good warning against dangerous and foolish ragging, and I believe I can trust you, for the honor of Brontë, not to let anything of the kind start again. Can't I?"

"Rather!" rang out from the younger girls, several of whom were looking rather conscious and considerably relieved.

"You're a sport, Pegs!" said Louise afterwards. "You've a way with you somehow among these girls. They've taken me back into the fold."

"I'm glad. You're a sport too, because you tried to shield me from something you thought I had done. I shan't forget that in a hurry, Lu."

“It was for you—and Brontë.”

“I’m glad you include Brontë. We’ll pull things up here and show what the poor old house can do. I’ve grand ideas for the term-end entertainment, and now I’m back we must set to work and rehearse hard. We’ll show the school that Brontë’s not going to come last on the list.

## CHAPTER VIII

### *Home-Made Drama*

The festivities at the end of the term were always a great affair at Somerton College. During the last week three evenings and an afternoon were devoted to entertainments. It was the custom for each house to give a short charade, play, or sketch composed by the girls themselves, and a committee of mistresses decided which was the best and awarded distinctions. Alcott and Greenaway, the two preparatory hostels, shared an afternoon, Austen, Milford, and Eliot, the senior houses, took a long evening, while the four transition houses divided two shorter evenings. Each had a strict time limit, so that the performances should be on an equality for judging, and the plays might be original or founded on some famous story, provided that the dialogue was written for the occasion. Owing to Peggie's illness matters were rather behind-hand at Brontë. Other hostels were rehearsing and making costumes, and throwing out hints about all the wonderful things with which they meant to astonish their audiences, but Brontë had not even decided what to act. It was Peggie's great ambition to write the term-end play, and during her convalescence at the sanatorium she had spent her time scribbling, and had

almost finished a sketch founded on incidents in the life of Queen Elizabeth. She called a committee together to discuss matters, and gave a brief account of her plot.

"H'm! We'd a historical charade last year," remarked Helen dubiously.

"I'm afraid the costumes would be very difficult," objected Dorothy. "We've so little time now to get them ready."

"Eliot are giving something about Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Philip Sidney," commented Mary.

"I've no doubt yours is nicer," put in Pauline tactfully.

"You'd better read it to us," said Cicely.

"Did you know Maggie has written a play?" asked Gracie suddenly.

Maggie Fowler, the girl whom Louise had christened "The Prawn in Spectacles", flushed scarlet. She was the shyest member of Brontë, quite a nonentity in the house, and generally mooned about by herself, taking scant part in public affairs. She was so retiring and so little given to conversation that the others paid slight attention to "poor old Maggie" as they generally called her. At the news that she had blossomed into literature some of the committee giggled audibly. Peggie turned a withering glance on the offenders.

"I'm glad to hear it," she said. "What's the play about, Maggie? Is it historical?"

"No, it's quite modern."

"I should like to see it. I think it will be better to adjourn this committee until I have read it, and then



I can report. Has anyone else written anything? Please understand that everybody has the right to submit something. It's for the committee to decide what to choose."

"I meant to try, but I was so busy while I was deputy I had no time," said Helen.

"I began a charade, but I tore it up," confessed Connie.

Nobody else would acknowledge authorship, so the meeting broke up. Later in the evening Maggie produced her manuscript and offered it shyly to the captain.

"I don't suppose it's any good, but you can look at it if you like," she gasped. (Maggie always spoke in a series of gasps.) "I expect it's only fit for the waste-paper basket."

At her leisure Peggie acted publisher's reader. The play was short, but it was interesting. There was no doubt that it was far and away the best which had been written by a member of Brontë.

"It beats mine hollow," she decided. "There's simply no question about it. It's modern and up-to-date, and the costumes would be easy. Peggie Paget, you'll have to climb down and take a back seat. One of the fine things you set yourself when you became captain was to write the Christmas play. Well, my dear, you can't. Somebody else has done it far better. Smash goes ambition number one. Maggie will win distinction for Brontë instead of you. There! Don't snivel. Take it sporting. You never thought you'd make a first-class captain. The girls don't want your precious historical sketch, and you may just as well tear it up. Bravo,

Maggie! I didn't know she'd got so much in her. She shall have her chance at any rate. I'll call another meeting and recommend her play to the committee."

It was characteristic of Peggie that she was ready at once to recognize talent in anyone else, and that she was generous enough to push Maggie's manuscript instead of her own. She had little difficulty in persuading the others to adopt the new work. When they read it they were delighted with it.

"So easy to act."

"Brings in so many characters."

"The bride will be no end."

"We'll have fun with that dialogue."

"It will make them laugh."

"Who's to be the society lady?"

"We must elect a special entertainment committee to decide the cast," decreed Peggie. "It's so very important that the best actresses take the best parts."

After this rehearsals went on briskly. Brontë made up for lost time, and its chosen members tried to outvie one another in dramatic fire. Much to their relief their play was fixed for the same evening with that of Cavell; they had dreaded having to share the dressing-room with their enemies the Gaskellites, who would now be a safe distance away in the audience. The term was speeding along quickly, and already everybody was beginning to talk of Christmas and holidays. Miss Sheppard, who was let into the secrets of Brontë's activities, was a jewel in the way of outside help, and procured any extra properties which they required, making a special visit to Baddesley to buy certain urgent

## Captain Peggie

necessaries. She was so clever at dressing and making up that she was specially requested to assist in that capacity on the important occasion. The best of Maggie's play was that in addition to the principals it allowed so many extra characters to walk on to the stage that every member of Brontë could be included in the performance, and could have the satisfaction of making an appearance even if she had no speech to deliver. Nobody liked to be left out, and it was certainly more fun to dress up and pose as a "wedding guest" than to sit among the audience and watch. Many girls who were no good at acting in the ordinary sense made excellent supers, and could carry on by-play in dumb show at the back of the stage.

At last *the* great day arrived! The preparatory houses had had their afternoon and had presented pretty versions of fairy tales, the seniors had acted adaptations from *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Mill on the Floss* and a scene from the life of Sir Walter Raleigh, and it was now the turn of the Middle School. The big recreation hall was packed full, for Miss Penrose had invited guests to swell the audience. Cavell came first, with a rather mild charade, the chief features of which were the charming costumes and a nicely executed folk dance. The dialogue was dull, but waving ribbons and garlands of artificial roses made a pleasing effect, and they received their due share of applause. There was a short interval with music to make a break between the performances, and then came the second part of the programme. As Maggie's little play was a tremendous

asset for Brontë, and had cost the authoress many hours of arduous work, it deserves to be given in full.

## SMART RELATIONS

### A PLAY IN THREE SCENES

#### CHARACTERS

NORA PENDLETON . . . A prospective bride and an orphan.

NAN PENDLETON . . . Her younger sister.

KENNETH OSBORNE . . . Nora's fiancé.

MRS. OSBORNE . . . Kenneth's mother.

EVELYN OSBORNE }  
OLAVE OSBORNE } . . . Kenneth's sisters.  
MAISIE OSBORNE }

THE HONORABLE MRS.

KENNEDY-FORSTER.

MISS ROSEMARY FORSTER }  
MISS EGLANTYNE FORSTER } Her daughters.

Wedding guests as desired.

A maid.

#### SCENE I

*A drawing-room. Nora is sitting at a table, sewing, surrounded by many articles of her trousseau*

*Nora.* "Stitch, stitch, stitch,  
With fingers weary and worn!"



## Captain Peggie

It's no joke going to be married. The number of clothes I seem to need is never ending. My bottom drawer is full, and my middle drawer, and my top drawer, and my wardrobe too. I wonder if I shall ever wear the things out, or if I shall be trying at forty to squeeze into the garments that fitted me at twenty-two. I hadn't any idea a wedding would be such a troublesome business. I sometimes wish Kenneth had offered to run away with me. An elopement would have been *such* fun. If only I'd lived a hundred years ago and could have driven to Gretna Green with a post-chaise and horses, and have been married by the famous blacksmith at the forge. We're not nearly so romantic nowadays.

[Enter NAN, a schoolgirl of fifteen.

Nan. Hello, Nora! Busy as usual! I shall be proud of these togs of yours when they're finished. (*Goes to the table and turns over some of the trousseau.*) This is a pretty jumper. Stand up and let me see how the color suits you. You'll look divine in it. And this afternoon dress. You must wear your pink beads and your pink silk stockings with it. The very thing to put on when people come to call on the bride. Nora, my dear, you're going to take Dunham by storm!

Nora (*modestly*). Oh, I don't know about that.

[There is a knock at the door, and a maid announces:

"The Misses Osborne". Enter EVELYN, OLAVE, and MAISIE OSBORNE, *very fashionably dressed and extremely up-to-date*. They bustle in.

Evelyn. Well, Nora! Are we a great surprise? We were in Bournemouth to-day, so we thought we'd look you up. Is this your sister? Haven't met her before, have I? How d'you do!

[Nan takes her knitting and listens while the others talk.

Olave. Busy with your trousseau? What energy! I'm going to get mine in town. I say, you've got some nice things here.

Maisie. Wonderful!

[The three sisters begin to turn over the various articles with much curiosity.

*Evelyn.* By the by, Nora, have you arranged yet where you're going to have your wedding? I can't get anything out of Kenneth; he's as close as an oyster about your plans.

*Maisie (breaking in).* Shall you be married in Bournemouth?

*Olave.* And have the reception at a hotel?

*Nora (thoughtfully).* I haven't decided yet. As Nan and I are orphans, with no settled home, it of course makes matters rather difficult.

*Evelyn.* But surely you've an aunt?

*Olave.* Or an uncle?

*Maisie.* Or some relations who'll offer to give the wedding from their house?

*Nora.* I'm not sure yet.

*Olave.* Our Cousin Joyce is an orphan, and *she* was married from the house of her uncle, General Chambers, in Park Lane. *Such* a smart affair. Eve was one of the bridesmaids. There was a beautiful account of it in *The Queen*.

*Evelyn.* You must be sure and ask Joan to the wedding. She's Mrs. Trevisa-Martin now.

*Nora.* Ken shall give me a list of all his people to whom I must send invitations.

*Maisie.* We can tell you some of them now—There's Lady Lowman—'

*Olave.* And Archdeacon White.

*Evelyn.* And the Dean of Descombe.

*Maisie.* And Colonel and Mrs. Heathcote.

*Olave.* And Canon and Mrs. Fraser.

*Nora.* I'm afraid I shall forget. Kenneth must write the names down with the addresses.

*Evelyn.* We shall be *so* interested to meet *your* relations at the reception! That's half the fun of a wedding, isn't it?

*Nora.* I suppose so.

*Maisie.* You don't know anybody at Dunham, do you? I hope people will be nice, and call.

*Evelyn.* It's so very important for Ken's profession that you should get into the best set.

## Captain Peggie

*Olave.* If only the Honorable Mrs. Kennedy-Forster takes you up you'll be all right.

*Nora.* Did I meet her when I stayed with you at Dunham?

*Olave.* No, she was away, but she and her two daughters lead Society. You meet anybody who is anybody at their house. People call her The Queen of Dunham.

*Nora.* Oh, indeed!

*Evelyn.* Well, we must be going, for we've promised to have lunch with a friend. Good-bye! (*to Nan*). So glad we were able to pop in and see you!

*Olave.* Good-bye!

*Maisie.* Good-bye!

[*They sweep elegantly out of the room.*]

*Nora.* Nan! Isn't it horrible? How could I confess to them that we haven't a relation in the world who'd offer to have my wedding from his house. Whom can we possibly ask to this wretched reception? We can't invite only Kenneth's guests and none of our own. The Osbornes will think us terrible people, and say Ken's marrying beneath him.

*Nan (fiercely).* Just let *me* hear them say so, that's all.

*Nora (beginning to cry).* I dread this wedding. I wish Ken would run away with me and get it over!

*Nan.* That wouldn't help things at all. Don't cry, old sport. Buck up! I've got an idea. What you want are some smart relations.

*Nora (hysterically).* I dare s-s-say! But we haven't g-g-g-ot any!

[*She wipes her eyes on some of the trousseau.*]

*Nan.* Then we must hire them. I know exactly what to do. We'll take a furnished house in the west end of London for a week, and we'll tell Messrs. Blackleys & Co. to arrange the wedding for us, including guests.

*Nora (tremulously).* Are you mad?

*Nan.* Certainly not! As sane as you are, and better able to make plans. Don't you know Blackleys are "Universal Providers" and can send you anything from an elephant to an oyster. If you want a partner for a dance, or an extra

gentleman for a dinner, Blackleys will produce him, so why shouldn't they supply us with a few Canons and Deans and Generals and their ladies? I think it's a brain-wave.

*Nora (beginning to smile).* It would really be rather fun. I could tell Kenneth in private. He'd love the joke and would keep the secret.

*Nan.* Then I vote we do it. Let's impress the Osbornes with our fashionable relations, and our west-end wedding, and we'll have an account of it in *The Queen* afterwards. Leave it to *me*, Nora. I'll write to Blackleys and arrange it all.

*Nora (embracing her).* I really do call you a trump of a sister.

(*Curtain.*)

## SCENE II

*A drawing-room. THE HONORABLE MRS. KENNEDY-FORSTER is sitting writing at a table. Her fashionable daughters ROSEMARY and EGLANTYNE are lolling in elegant attitudes in arm-chairs.*

*Mrs. Kennedy-Forster.* How can I do my accounts, when you girls keep talking? I wish you'd be quiet for a while. Rosemary, half of this milliner's bill is for you. You're most extravagant about hats, and I really can't afford continually to buy new ones. Eglantyne, you seem to wear out a fresh pair of silk stockings every week. It's quite ridiculous. Both of you will have to be far more economical if we're to make ends meet.

*Rosemary (languidly).* Won't the tiresome old bills wait for a while? I *must* have a new hat for the regatta!

*Eglantyne.* You wouldn't like me in darned stockings, Mother!

[*She stretches out her feet and looks at them with approbation.*]

*Mrs. Kennedy-Forster.* You'll both go barefoot and hatless if you ruin me at this rate.



## Captain Peggie

*Eglantyne (laughing).* We shall have to live at the seaside then, and dress in our bathing-costumes.

*Mrs. Kennedy-Forster (turning up a bill).* And those were far more expensive than I had expected.

*Rosemary.* There's nothing for it, Mother, but to try and make some money somehow.

*Mrs. Kennedy-Forster.* That's easier said than done. What can two useless girls like you do?

*Eglantyne (laughing again).* Sweep a crossing. That's all we're fit for. We don't write or fiddle or paint, and you can't earn a living by golfing and dancing.

*Rosemary.* Unless it's stage dancing. We're ornaments to society. That's what we are.

*Mrs. Kennedy-Forster.* Very extravagant ornaments.

*Eglantyne (suddenly sitting up).* But still we're ornaments. Mother, I have an idea! Why shouldn't we let ourselves out to parties? I believe Blackleys supply people with emergency guests and pay them handsomely for going. We've plenty of nice dresses; why not write to Blackleys and say we're ready to turn up at any function that's wanted, a dance, or a dinner, or a tennis party, or a bridge drive, or a wedding? It would be awful sport!

*Mrs. Kennedy-Forster (doubtfully).* But suppose we met our friends?

*Eglantyne.* All the better. We shouldn't go labelled "hired by Blackleys". Nobody need know anything at all about it.

*Mrs. Kennedy-Forster.* But the hostess might be impossible.

*Eglantyne.* No one's impossible nowadays with money, and if she hadn't money she couldn't hire us. Everybody goes everywhere since the war.

*Rosemary.* I call it a jolly good idea. We should get the fun of the parties and be paid for turning up at them. I give it my vote, by all means.

*Eglantyne.* Write and offer us as a family, Mother!

*Mrs. Kennedy-Forster (toying with her pen).* Shall I? Your father would have been horrified. And yet many society people do such things nowadays. And after all if it were in

London we shouldn't meet any friends from Dunham.

*Rosemary.* We could bluff it off if we did.

*Mrs. Kennedy-Forster.* I don't know how I'm going to pay all these bills unless I have some help.

*Eglantyne.* Well, there's your way. Better write the letter at once.

*Mrs. Kennedy-Forster.* Are you both absolutely agreed upon it?

*Rosemary.* Certainly!

*Eglantyne.* Certainly!

*Mrs. Kennedy-Forster.* It seems a very backstairs method of making money, but it's more honest than borrowing. Very well, girls. If you're willing, so am I. I shall write to Messrs. Blackleys at once.

*[She takes pen and paper, and begins to write.]*

*(Curtain)*

## SCENE III

*A drawing-room. A wedding reception is in progress. NORA, dressed as a bride, and KENNETH OSBORNE as bridegroom, are receiving guests, who come in and shake hands.*

*MRS. OSBORNE and her three daughters are in the room.*

*'Mrs. Osborne (to guest).* Didn't it go off delightfully? Nora makes a charming bride. I thought the choir sang quite beautifully. And the Dean's address was so nice.

*First guest.* Yes, and not too long. It's so trying for the bride to have to stand and listen to a sermon.

*Mrs. Osborne.* But of course the Dean is my brother-in-law!

*Maisie (to second guest).* Quite a crowd isn't it?

*Second guest.* Quite. Many of your relations?

*Maisie.* Oh yes! The Archdeacon, and Lady Lowman, and Colonel and Mrs. Heathcote, and a few others, the rest are Nora's. We never met them till to-day.

*Second guest.* They seem very pleasant. It's so nice when one's friends rally at a wedding.

## Captain Peggie

*Olave (to third guest).* How do you like me as a bridesmaid?

*Third guest.* I think your dress is just charming.

*Evelyn (to fourth guest).* The flowers were sent by some friends of Nora's.

*Fourth guest.* I've been admiring them the whole time.

[*Enter MRS. KENNEDY-FORSTER with her two daughters.*

*She moves enthusiastically towards the bride, and seizes her fondly by the hand.*

*Mrs. Kennedy-Forster (gushingly).* My dear! Let me congratulate you. Everything is perfect. I don't know when I have seen a prettier wedding! The girls are in raptures!

*Rosemary.* It's wonderful!

*Eglantyne.* You bore up so well!

*Mrs. Kennedy-Forster (smiling at bridegroom).* You both went through the ceremony splendidly. I could hear every word.

*Kenneth Osborne.* Thanks! I think we both felt nervous all the same. Here's my mother. By the by, I believe you know her!

*Mrs. Osborne. (in great surprise).* Mrs. Kennedy-Forster!

*Mrs. Kennedy-Forster (repressing a start).* Mrs. Osborne!

*Mrs. Osborne.* What a delightful surprise to meet *you* here! Then you're a friend of Nora's?

*Mrs. Kennedy-Forster (promptly).* Oh yes, of Nora's!

*Mrs. Osborne.* And I never knew! The sly child not to tell us! I suppose she wanted to astonish us! Isn't she a dear girl?

*Mrs. Kennedy-Forster.* Oh, perfectly charming!

*Maisie (to Rosemary).* How delightful that you know Nora! Did you meet her abroad?

*Rosemary (tactfully).* We've been so much abroad, and of course you meet people at hotels.

*Olave (to Eglantyne).* Why weren't *you* a bridesmaid?

*Eglantyne.* Well, I've been one twice, you see, and it's supposed to be unlucky if you're a bridesmaid three times, though I never believe in superstitions.

*Olave.* Kenneth and Nora have taken a delightful house at Dunham, but of course you'll see it when you call.

*Mrs. Osborne (raising her voice and speaking to all).* We are asked to move on and pass into the dining-room, where the wedding presents are on view.

*[Exeunt the guests, all except the bride and bridegroom and Nan.]*

*Kenneth.* Nora! How did you manage to get hold of Mrs. Kennedy-Forster and her daughters, the most exclusive people in Dunham?

*Nora (laughing).* They were supplied to me by Blackleys—but don't tell!

*Kenneth.* Heavens! It's the funniest thing on earth! They'll *have* to call on us now, to save their reputation.

*Nora.* Then we shall be a great social success!

*Kenneth.* You clever girl!

*Nora.* Don't praise *me*, it was Nan's idea entirely.

*Kenneth (holding out his hand to Nan).* I think you're the most perfect sport I've ever met. The thing has worked admirably. Many congratulations to my new sister!

*Nan (laughing).* It's rather surprising to find ourselves such dear friends with so many strangers, and especially with the Honorable Mrs. Kennedy-Forster. If she doesn't want to give her secret away she will have to keep friends in future. Isn't it time you went to cut the wedding-cake? I hear the rattle of tea-cups.

*Nora (taking her husband's arm and turning to him as they go out).* I'm so very glad, dear, that you like our "Smart relations".

By universal vote the part of Nora had been given to Peggie. She looked the character exactly, and sighed, wept, rejoiced, and even blushed in the right places. Her wedding costume was quite wonderful, with a curtain for a train, and a large piece of mosquito netting for a veil, and some imitation orange blossom which



## Captain Peggie

Miss Sheppard had purchased in Baddesley. The girls had raised a private subscription and surprised her with a "bridal bouquet", a really beautiful posy tied with white satin ribbon in orthodox fashion. Connie, as Kenneth, had found dressing more difficult. There was a selection of "masculine garb" in the school "dramatic wardrobe", but none of it fitted, and the bridegroom walked on conscious of baggy trousers and a too large collar, but trying to make up for deficiencies by the fervor of his concluding remarks. Dorothy, as the Honorable Mrs. Kennedy-Forster was inimitable. She was "got up regardless", in an enormous hat, a feather boa, the daintiest of shoes, and a lorgnette to finish her aristocratic appearance. Dorothy was Brontë's best actress; she played up for the occasion, even to an exact mimicry of the deep-toned voice of a society lady whom she had met in the summer at an hotel. Helen and Enid, as her daughters, carried off their parts with success, Lena, Esmé, and Betty were capital as the three fashionable Osborne sisters, and Mary, though not so good as Kenneth's mother, passed muster quite creditably.

The girls, possibly to make up for misunderstandings, had voted the character of Nan to Louise. It was most appropriate, as the scheme of the plot was just the sort of madcap idea which Louise would have originated, and she played her part with gusto, evidently thoroughly enjoying it. The rest of Brontë, attired in both masculine and feminine costumes, strolled on to the stage as wedding guests, very pleased with their appearance as "smart relations". Pauline as the colonel, with a



"NORA" AND "KENNETH"



grey moustache and a flower in his buttonhole was worthy of a speech, but had to be content with dumb-show conversation, while the dean, with Miss Shepard's tall spats for gaiters, looked benevolent and ecclesiastical, as if he had performed the ceremony.

There was tremendous clapping at the close, and as the curtain went up once more for a final view, there came cries of "Author! Author!" Maggie, who was a poor actress and who had refused to take a leading part in her own play, was hiding behind other wedding guests, but "Nora" and "Kenneth" dragged her forth, and placed her between them to make her acknowledgment to the audience. With a crimson face she gave a prim little bow, and would have run away again, but for the firm hands of the bride and bridegroom.

On the following evening came the turns of Gaskell and Nightingale, the one gave a scene from *Cranford*, and the other an episode from the Crimean War, bringing in their "Lady of the Lamp", Florence Nightingale. Both were interesting, and quite creditable, though some of the acting was rather stiff.

It was now the difficult and delicate task of Miss Penrose and the committee of mistresses to decide on the respective merits of the nine separate performances. They judged on various points, giving marks for the piece, for acting, for costumes, and for general effect. The whole school assembled to hear the result.

"I consider," said Miss Penrose, "that all the plays this time have been remarkably good. They mark a great advance on those of last year, and have been most amusing and entertaining. I desire to commend



## Captain Peggie

Austen for the excellence of the old world atmosphere maintained in the scene from *Pride and Prejudice*, also Nightingale for the beautifully arranged representation of the "Lady of the Lamp" visiting her sick soldiers in the camp hospital. After some discussion we have all voted in favor of Brontë: the sketch *Smart Relations* by Maggie Fowler is by far the most original of all, and it had several good situations, bright dialogue, and was acted with great spirit. I have much pleasure in awarding the distinction therefore to Brontë. Author, please."

The shyest of the shy, and blushing carmine, retiring Maggie shambled forward to the platform, where Miss Penrose handed her a large wreath made of laurels and tied with silver ribbons. It was of no special value, but it was a most coveted "distinction", and would be hung up in the hall at Brontë and be treasured till its leaves crumbled to dust. It was the first year that Brontë had ever won the dramatic honor, and it marked a great event for the house. On the strength of this it could hold up its head next term and take quite a different position in the school.

"I'm so excited we've won. But I hoped we should have acted *your* play, and *you* would have marched up for the wreath, Pegs," said Louise to her cousin.

"It doesn't matter in the least. I don't care so long as Brontë has the distinction."

"Always Brontë!"

"Of course. Aren't you beginning to feel the same?"

"Perhaps I am. A term here makes a difference. I didn't care when I first came."

"You care now, though? You'll be as proud of the house as anybody in the end?"

"Miss Captain Peggie, if everyone were as loyal to her hostel and to Somerton as you are it would be a good thing for Brontë and for the school," returned Louise.

## CHAPTER IX

### *Just For Fun*

On 19th December Somerton College "broke up" for the holidays. Once more motor-buses, piled with handbags outside and crowded with schoolgirls inside, plied to the station, and once more came the cheerful chattering and buzzing that marked the removal. On the platform Louise was met by Miss Croft's sister. She carried a neat wooden box with a piece of perforated zinc in the lid for ventilation. To judge from the scrambling inside it contained Dongo.

"I've taken great care of him, and he's very well," she said. "I've nailed up the box. Don't try to open it until you reach home. He has plenty of food. If he got loose in the train and escaped and you lost him it would be such a pity. He's a darling, and I'm quite sorry to part with him."

"I don't know how to thank you," exclaimed Louise gratefully, trying to peep at her pet through the ventilator.

Louise and Peggie were travelling home together. The Pagets lived at Ridgeway, a small place in Dorset, and the Ropers had taken a furnished house there for six weeks, so that the cousins could join forces for Christmas festivities. Peggie's three brothers would

be back from school and college, also Louise's brother Roy, and they were looking forward to plenty of fun during the vacation. Louise—little fireworks that she was—arrived home like a comet, but settled down immediately as "daughter of the house".

"What have you done to her at Somerton, Peggie?" asked her astonished mother. "She's utterly different. Of course, she's still Louise, but she's so much more reasonable and sensible and ready to help. She doesn't squabble with Roy now, or get into 'tantrums' at the least thing. Everybody used to tell me 'send her to school', but I couldn't have believed that a term would make so much improvement. What's your secret?"

"Oh, I don't know! Lu's had no time for tantrums. She's got very interested in Brontë, and has been trying to help on the house."

"Then I bless Brontë," said Mrs. Roper. "It was a fortunate day when we sent her there."

Christmas was a distinctly family affair. It was many years since the Pagets and Ropers had spent it together, and they enjoyed being a united party. The young folks were too old for stockings and Christmas trees, but they played games and told stories and finished the evening with a little dance. Including Peggie's elder sister Phyllis there were seven of them, quite enough to create much fun and to insure against any dullness during the holidays. They all found plenty to do in the way of amusement. Sometimes they went bicycling to places of interest in the neighborhood, sometimes they took a turn at golf; there was a grand excursion to a pantomime in an adjacent town, and



## Captain Peggie

they sampled local concerts and the cinema. Ridgeway was in the midst of fine country, and though January scenery was inclined to be sodden and desolate there were beautiful bits of woodland, and stretches of common near the golf links where patches of gorse were blooming.

Early in the new year came a few days of glorious mild weather, so unusually warm and fine for the season that spring seemed for the moment to have usurped the place of winter, snowdrops and polyanthus peeped up in the garden, yellow jessamine bloomed on the porch, and starlings plumed their feathers and sang cheerful little songs in the sunshine. Such a halcyon interlude tempted the party of cousins to make an expedition to Oldcombe, a small seaside place about ten miles away from Ridgeway. They went on bicycles, and took packets of sandwiches and cake and thermos flasks of coffee so that they might have a picnic. The boys even added bathing costumes and towels.

"It's as warm as Easter and quite fit for a dip," decided Claude.

"These are not the first Christmas holidays we've gone for a swim," agreed Nelson.

"Of course we always bathed at Christmas in Africa," said Roy.

"Naturally, when you lived south of the equator and had your summer in January. I'm afraid you'll find British water very cold."

"I'll chance it anyhow. It can't be much colder than one's morning tub."

"Oh, can't it! Wait and see!"

It was not a particularly long ride to Oldcombe, though there were one or two stiff hills up which they had to wheel their bicycles. The little town itself was rather slummy and uninteresting, and presented no attractions, so they left their machines at a restaurant and set out to follow a path which led along the cliffs. When sordid cottages and fowl enclosures were left behind the view began to improve, and by the time they had walked a mile and a half they were completely in the country. The cliffs faced south, and were protected by spurs of hills from the prevailing west wind, so that on this January day they had the full benefit of the sunshine. The one disadvantage was the difficulty of approaching the sea. Many attractive coves could be seen below, yet it was utterly impossible to climb down to them. Our party had to walk quite a long way before they found a place practicable to scramble on to the rocks beneath. Here they were on the edge of a very precipitous cove, inaccessible from the farther side, and so difficult to reach even from the rocks that they decided not to attempt the descent.

"The tide's coming in so fast that we can dive from here, have our swim, and scramble out again," decided Claude. "We'd better do it now while the water's up."

"We'll be laying lunch ready," said Phyllis. "Don't stay in too long. I'm afraid the sea will be colder than you think."

"Nonsense! We shall enjoy being braced up."

"Then don't swim too far."

"We'll go to the other side of the cove and back."

"Too risky."

## Captain Peggie

"Not a bit! We'll have a race there just for fun and show you."

"Yes, *just for fun!*" agreed Roy.

"It will be a little too much fun if you're caught in a current," warned cautious Phyllis.

"Rubbish! Girls are such scaremongers."

"You wait and see."

"We'll have a garland of gorse ready for the winner," laughed Louise. "It's the only flower that's out at present."

"Rather a prickly honor, thanks."

"Well, pride must suffer pain. We shall insist on crowning the conquering hero, so prepare your brow for the prickles."

The boys retreated to some bushes and changed into their bathing costumes, then coming to the edge of the rocks they dived one after the other into the water. They were all strong swimmers, and though it was undoubtedly chilly, the exercise soon warmed them. They had a race across the mouth of the cove and landed upon a low half submerged rock on the farther side. They scrambled to their feet and stood up admiring the view and watching the seagulls that screamed round the cliff. It had been a harder task to swim the bay than they had expected, for there was a strong swell on, and they were all glad to have a few minutes' rest before returning. Suddenly, and as it seemed without warning, they saw advancing towards them an enormous wave, so great that it looked like a gigantic green wall of water rolling in from the sea. Claude, the most experienced of the bathers, shouted to the others and

dived for self preservation, but his brothers and cousin bent backwards and tried to hold their own against the force of the wave. Man's puny strength is as nought against the mighty power of nature; the great volume of water whirled the boys from their feet and dashed them like matches up the cove on to the beach beyond. Roy was cast, half stunned, into a crevice, and Nelson and Chris, by gripping tightly at the seaweed, managed to cling to the rocks and avoid being carried down by the backwash of the huge wave.

The girls meanwhile spent the most agonizing moments of their lives. They had watched the green mountain advance and had shouted a warning, but unheard. One moment four splendid young figures were standing upon the rock, and the next—*there were no boys!* It was not until foam and water had washed back that they saw Claude's dark head emerge, and ran to the edge of the rocks to help to drag him from the sea. They were too far away to be able to communicate with the others, though they could see them in the cove, and watched Chris and Nelson pull Roy out of the crevice. How the three boys ever managed to swim the bay again and regain the cliff was a miracle even to themselves. Roy was dazed by his fall and had to be dragged along by his cousins, giving them an experience in life-saving. All three were very much cut and bruised, though no bones had been broken. The girls tore up handkerchiefs and towels and applied first aid to the best of their skill, giving the wounded heroes hot coffee from the thermos flasks, but the cuts were bleeding badly in spite of their efforts, and Phyllis.



## Captain Peggie

the only one who had studied ambulance, grew frightened.

"We must get you a doctor as fast as possible," she urged. "All these places ought to be washed to take the sea water out of them, and there's no fresh water here. Let us climb on to the path above and go back to Oldcombe. We'll stop at the first cottage and ask for help."

The miles that seemed quite short on their outward walk lengthened interminably as the poor boys, stiff, sore, and battered, limped painfully along. Roy indeed was on the verge of collapse when luckily they reached the point where the path joined the road, and a passing motorist, noticing their plight, stopped his car and offered the invalids a lift. He ran them into Oldcombe and left them at the doctor's surgery, where their cuts were washed with disinfectant and dressed, and the bleeding stopped. It was a long process, for the doctor was conscientious over it, and Claude and the girls, who had followed to the surgery, spent more than an hour waiting until they were ready. They emerged at last, looking as if they had been at the war, Roy with his head bound up, Nelson limping on a bandaged leg, and Chris with his right arm in a sling. It was plain they were quite unfit to bicycle, and after refreshing them with tea at a restaurant Claude managed to charter a car to convey them home.

"Don't give Mother too big a shock when you arrive," warned Phyllis. "Tell her we're all alive. I'm afraid Aunt Lucy will have hysterics when she sees Roy.

We'll ride back as quick as we can. Your bicycles must stay here till they can be fetched."

"I bet the Mater will scream when we turn up," smiled Nelson.

"We've got our money's worth in bandages," declared Chris.

Though the young people might joke about the matter they all knew that they had been on the verge of a tragedy, that the great cruel wave might have spared none, and that those who now sat laughing in the car might have been floating very quietly and still on the grey waters of the channel. Louise's eyes were full of tears as she waved good-bye.

"It would have just killed Mummie if anything had happened to Roy," she whispered to Peggie. "Are they safe now?"

"Yes, thanks to first aid and the doctor. How chilly it is. Ugh! We shall catch cold if we stand still. I vote we fetch our bicycles and ride home at once."

The invalids certainly created a sensation when they arrived at Ridgeway, but their injuries were not so great as their many bandages would have given people to suppose, and they soon began to recover. Bicycling, golf, long walks, or dancing were for the present suspended, so it became a little difficult to amuse them. To keep them entertained Mrs. Paget organized a series of afternoon parties, inviting young people from the neighborhood for tea, with competitions, games, and charades afterwards. As many of the friends came from a distance and had to go home along dark country lanes, it was more convenient to hold the

## Captain Peggie

festivities early, and to let the guests depart with their lanterns by seven o'clock.

Every fresh form of amusement was thought of, from a revival of ping-pong, which Chris played with his left arm, to guessing advertisements, or memorizing a tray full of small articles exhibited for a two-minute brief inspection. Louise turned out rather clever at making fresh suggestions, and with her mother's permission arranged that one of the tea-drinkings should be held at their own house. She astonished everybody with the elaboration of her preparations. To her mother, who had taken her as a tiresome spoilt child to Somerton, she seemed suddenly to have grown up, so capable did she prove herself at arranging flowers, printing competition programmes, baking cakes, setting out dainty little tea tables, and other feminine employments in which before she had been woefully deficient. She received her guests quite prettily, and showed herself a good hostess by taking care that everyone had a pleasant time, and that nobody was left in a corner or neglected. Her competition was a novelty, so far as her set of friends was concerned. They had not tried it before. Each visitor was requested to bring to the party a photograph of himself or herself as a baby or as a very young child. The portraits were given privately to the hostess, who numbered them, and set them out for exhibition. The competitors, armed with cards and pencils, were required to guess the identity of the various podgy infants, a matter of much difficulty and unlimited amusement, for the connection between a ball of fat, clad solely in a vest, and

a stalwart undergraduate of 6 ft. 1 in. was often obscure. Many were the mistakes, the guests even mixed the sexes, and Phyllis at six months found herself figuring as the Rev. Basil Wainwright, to the embarrassment of that worthy young curate and the delighted chuckles of the boys, while Louise as a belligerent-looking baby was written down by most as Nelson or Claude.

Peggie gained the prize, but having known nearly all the originals of the portraits from childhood, she had an advantage over newcomers, and indeed said herself that it was unfair for her to win.

"It can't be helped. The others have had the fun of guessing and that's the main thing. Your score's the highest so, of course, you must come out top," said Louise, handing her cousin a bottle of lavender water, and bestowing a little nigger mascot, as booby prize, upon Chris, who had been purposely guessing wrong in order to "rag" his friends.

Everybody clamored now for the charades, so the party divided into two companies, one of which left the room to arrange scenes. Peggie was in the audience, and to tease her a little for having acted bride in *Smart Relations*, Claude, who was leader of the performers, illustrated the first syllable of the word by a wedding. Jack Helston, an enormous young fellow of over six feet in his stockings, represented the fair lady. He was draped in sheets to represent bridal attire, and wore as veil a lace window curtain hastily pulled down for the occasion. He carried a bouquet of holly and paper flowers wrenched from the Christmas decorations



## Captain Peggie

in the hall. His train was held by boy-bridesmaids, decked out in various articles of feminine attire. Chairs were arranged in the room to represent a church, and he strode, with large feet, along the supposed aisle towards the altar. He looked the most absurd figure imaginable, as he stood glancing round in frenzied anxiety for the bridegroom, who had not yet turned up.

"Will he come? Do you think he means to desert me?" asked the deep manly voice of the bride.

"No, no, darling! He'll be here in a moment. He'd forgotten the ring," squeaked the bridesmaids, in what they considered truly feminine accents.

Then in hopped the bridegroom, a bobbed-haired girlish little figure in a boy's coat and trousers, with a huge paper rose in his buttonhole, and holding aloft an enormous brass curtain ring. He nipped up the aisle to the side of his bouncing bride, reaching scarcely to her shoulder, and began to assure her in tender tones that the ceremony could now proceed. The contrast between the rugged lady and the *petit* gentleman was like that between an owl and a canary, and the audience laughed so much that they completely forgot to listen for the word of the charade.

Claude's next scene represented a village fair, with travelling shows. Louise, padded with pillows, was the "fat woman", there was a gipsy with a performing dog, a conjurer who offered to swallow a carving knife, and a professor of astrology who told fortunes and characters. He was interviewed by a lady, and fixed his deep eyes upon hers as if he were trying an experiment in hypnotism.

"How old were you when you were born?" he asked commandingly.

"Seventeen," she faltered.

"Write down liar," he said to his secretary, who was making notes of the character.

But the lady objected to such an item being recorded and wanted her money back, and the scene ended in a fierce altercation between her friends and the Professor of astrology, which was developing into a wrestling match among the boys till Mr. Roper remarked, "There! There! That'll do please. Spare the furniture," whereupon the performers made a hasty exit.

Scene 3, which was to contain the whole word of the charade, showed its actors upon a beach. Chairs covered with waterproofs served for rocks, behind which two of the company carried on a violent flirtation, while the rest, in elegant attitudes, lazed on the sands with cushions. The matron of the party presently missed her daughter and began a search, calling loudly for "Dorothy". She peeped everywhere except in the right place, till finally her "little boy", a tall youth in socks and an improvised sailor collar cut from a newspaper, pointed out to her the retreat of the lovers, whereupon she wrathfully trounced her daughter away, and the indignant girl, weeping with disappointment, set upon the horrid little brother, smacked him soundly, and called him a tell-tale.

"Tell-tale! Tell-tale!" shouted the audience, having at last guessed the word. "Very good indeed."

The gratified actors stood in a row and bowed, then retired to change their costumes and leave the field

## Captain Peggie

clear for the performance of the second company. Their rivals on the stage decided that instead of giving another charade, they would produce some historical scenes in dumb show, the subjects to be guessed by the audience. They were a very long time in dressing, but finally appeared in eastern costumes, while one of their number, in a dark coat with a striped hearth-rug on his bent back seemingly represented a camel, that knelt when the cavalcade stopped. The bargaining which followed over the head of a gaily arrayed lad, though conducted without words, left little doubt as to the nature of the agreement, and "Joseph sold by his brethren" was easily guessed.

The second historical scene was strictly classical. The actors were clad in sheets arranged as Roman togas, while a couple of them, apparently lictors, carried bundles of walking sticks and golf clubs in lieu of rods. An obsequious lackey in a toga, bearing what looked suspiciously like an upturned cake basket on a velvet cushion, offered the doubtful article to the magnificent central figure of the group, who waved it away with disdain, whereupon the crowd clapped enthusiastically. In spite of the unlikeness of the cake basket to a diadem, there was no difficulty in recognizing "Julius Cæsar rejecting the crown".

The young people found the scenes in dumb show almost more amusing than charades, and would have given others, but time had outstripped them and the clock had already struck seven, so the guests, with mackintoshes and lanterns, bade their good-byes and plunged into the pouring rain outside, while the Roper

family, aided by Peggie and Phyllis, set to work to tidy up a part at least of the extreme muddle which is always the result of amateur theatricals.

"You're quite a nice little actress now, Louise," said her father proudly. "Where have you learnt that?"

"At Brontë, of course."

"Everything seems to be Brontë nowadays."

"That's Peggie's fault. She's rubbed the house into me so thoroughly, that I feel labelled Brontë for the rest of my life now."

"It has a good effect upon you evidently, and you seem to thrive upon it. You'll trot off to school without all the fuss you made last September, I hope?"

"Oh, I don't in the least mind going back this term," replied Louise airily. "I told you before, Dad, I *like* Somerton."



## CHAPTER X

### *An Adventure In The Snow*

Although Louise might not be ready to confess as much, she had thoroughly enjoyed spending the holidays with her brother Roy. The pair were apt to spar and squabble, yet they were really fond of one another, and had been accustomed to do most things together. Roy was a year and a half younger than Louise, a fine boy, nearly as tall as his sister and with the same light brown eyes and tawny hair. His first term at an English preparatory school had been rather a rough experience, for he also was a half tamed lion-cub, and he had much to tell of dormitory rags and of doings in the playground. St. Jocelyn's, however, had worked improvement, and according to Claude, Nelson, and Chris, had "licked him considerably into shape" since the last summer. This was the first Christmas that the young Ropers had spent in their mother country, and they had been greatly disappointed that a British January, instead of bringing the traditional snow and ice, had treated them to mild sunny days or drizzling rain. Roy, who was quite recovered from the results of his adventure in the cove, was most annoyed.

"I wish we were back at the old farm," he said one day, looking disconsolately out of the window at wet

roofs and sopping garden. "At least we knew what the weather was going to do there. We could plan our picnics and things, and always count on going. I don't like your northern Christmas. It's all humbug about snow. We haven't seen so much as a flake of it. Give me the south side of the equator."

"I suppose Christmas was midsummer to you there?" said Peggie. "Was it hot?"

"Rather! But we didn't mind that in the least. We'd stunning times. Hadn't we, Lu?"

"I should think so. Do you remember last New Year's Day?"

"What did you do?" asked Peggie.

"We joined some neighbors and trekked up into the hills. We took two bullock wagons with our tents and blankets and kettles and prog, and the girls rode in them sometimes, but we boys walked all the way. The Johnsons, our friends, had a kraal at Mount Victoria. It was built just exactly like a Kafir kraal, with mud walls and a thatched roof, but it was clean inside and very cool. Every morning we used to get up early and go bathe in the river. We used to fish too, and go off shooting. It was prime!"

"And what did the girls do?"

"Oh, I don't know. Mooch about the camp, I suppose."

"We didn't!" exclaimed Louise indignantly. "We bathed too, and we used to hunt for wild flowers. I killed a snake once. It crawled into the kraal and I took a boot and hit it on the head. I have the skin still. We'd wild times at Mount Victoria. I didn't

## Captain Peggie

want to go home to the farm. And I was more cross still when Dad said we were to pack up and start for England. Roy and I hated the idea of England."

"Hated England, indeed! Why?"

"Well, you see, it was always being poked down our throats. Whenever I did anything Mums didn't like she said: 'You wouldn't be allowed to do that in an English boarding school'."

"And Dad was the same," put in Roy. "It was: 'Just wait till you get to an English school, my boy, and you'll have a taste of the cane', or 'What will your cousins in England think of you?' or 'When I was a boy in England I never did that'."

"Ugh! England seemed a regular bogey-hole," continued Louise. "Roy and I made up our minds we'd let Dad and Mums go back alone, and we'd run away to Mount Victoria. We'd packed our things in the bullock cart, and we'd bribed our Kafir boy to go with us, and we'd got up very early on purpose—and then it all fizzled out. Davey, our Kafir boy, said he saw spooks, and he sat shivering under the hedge instead of fetching the bullocks, and then Dad got up and came out and found us, and there was a row, and Mother cried and said we should break her heart yet, so we unpacked all the things out of the bullock cart again, and didn't go."

"We liked the voyage home though," vouchsafed Roy.

"Oh, yes, it was glorious on board ship! We had all sorts of games and sports. We used to play cricket with a hemp ball, and ring quoits. And we had a fancy

dress dance and concerts. Crossing the line was the biggest fun."

"What was that?"

"When we reached the equator all the boys on the ship who had not crossed before were taken prisoners by the sailors. They put a big bath on deck, and one sailor was dressed up as Neptune, and first he pretended to shave the boys, he soaped their faces and scraped them with a piece of old iron, then he ducked them one after another backwards in the bath. Oh how most of them spluttered—specially you, Roy."

"I might well. They stuck a soapy brush inside my mouth. The sailors were all singing:

"Shave him and bash him,  
Duck him and splash him,  
Torture and smash him,  
And don't let him go.'"

"Yes, and then the captain pretended to have a wireless message from the Archbishop of Canterbury, to say that Father Neptune, being a pagan, ought to be baptized, and that it was a good opportunity to do it while the bath was handy, and several sailors rushed at him, but he struggled and fought and managed to get away, and the captain roared with laughter and said they'd never been able to christen Father Neptune yet, and he'd stay a pagan to the end of time."

"Did you stop at any foreign places on the way home?"

"Yes, at Madeira. It was lovely there. The roads were so steep people used to slide down them in sledges.



And the gardens were beautiful. I never saw so many flowers anywhere. But we only had a peep and couldn't stay. Getting into Tilbury Docks was the most exciting, and driving in a taxi across London to our hotel. I didn't know so many houses could exist. Dad took us about a little in London to see things. We went to Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's."

"And to Madame Tussaud's and to a circus," added Roy. "What I liked best was driving about on the tops of omnibuses. The policemen were ripping too."

"Roy got lost once," explained Louise, "and he was taken to a police station and had such a good time there he didn't want to go away when Dad came to find him. He told the policemen all about South Africa, and they gave him a cup of tea and some bananas."

"They called me 'Sonny' and were awful sports," confirmed Roy.

"But what we expected in England was snow and frost," went on Louise. "You see we'd read some of Dickens and other books about Christmas, and we thought December and January would be all icicles and skating. I put a sledge and pair of skates on my Christmas list, but Dad laughed and said: 'Wait till you want them'. He gave me a new camera instead. Do you *ever* go tobogganing here?"

"We've only had it once that I can remember."

"Well, I think the climate must have changed, or else the old writers were humbugs. We tell Dad he ought to take us to Switzerland, or to Norway, or to the North Pole. He's bribed us to come to England on false pretences. It's been nothing but rain, rain,

rain, and drizzle, drizzle, drizzle, this last week. It's a country for mackintoshes and goloshes. Ugh! I'm sick of it all."

All things come to those who wait, however, and when the last week of the holidays began the weather suddenly changed, and a cold snap set in. Arctic winds, presumably from the North Pole, sent the temperature below freezing-point, and white rime on the trees and icicles hanging on the pump proclaimed a real old-fashioned orthodox English season of Yule. Better still, it began to snow. For a whole night thick flakes came whirling down, and when the Ropers awoke in the morning they found a white world. Louise and Roy were nearly wild with excitement. They ran into the garden, made their first snowballs, and pelted one another, then, tempted by the beauty of the prospect of the distant hills and woods in their wintry covering, nothing would content them but to go at once for a long walk. They would not wait for their cousins, but set off immediately after breakfast that they might climb out of the valley and get the view over the country while the sun still shone and glistened on the snow. After their life in the Transvaal they were most independent young people, and used to rambling where they pleased and taking care of themselves. They stopped on their way at a shop, and bought buns and chocolate which they put in their pockets, and with this provision to ward off hunger they intended to stay out as long as they liked. They each carried a large wooden box-lid upon which they hoped to do some tobogganing if a suitable place could be found.

## Captain Peggie

"We won't go home too soon," proclaimed Roy.

"Rather not! While the snow's here we'll make the most of it and have our fun. Let's go right up the hill, and then explore the woods. Oh, I say, isn't it glorious?"

They had left the town behind them and were on a road that led steadily upwards between hedges and fields. Every leaf and blade of grass was covered with glittering hoar-frost, little fir trees gleamed like silver, and the meadows were masses of pure white untrodden snow. Flocks of hungry birds flew overhead, and thrushes and redwings were fighting for berries in the hawthorn bushes. The crisp invigorating air made walking easy, and Louise and Roy soon reached the summit above the town. From here the view was magnificent. They could see miles of country spreading before them, with woods and common and a grey river winding its way in the far distance. Abandoning the road they climbed a fence, crossed some fields, and entered a copse which led into a small ravine. It was fun scrambling down among rocks and trees, shaking showers of snow on their heads as they clutched at the branches. There was a little waterfall at the bottom all hung with icicles, a most beautiful sight, as if the frost fairies had been busy there during the night. Farther on there was a fence from the copse bordering a steep uninterrupted slope of field, so over they climbed.

"We ought to be able to toboggan here," said Louise joyfully.

"You bet we'll try," agreed Roy.

So they started, and after a good many tumbles and much experimenting they discovered the right way to use their improvised sleds, and had many glorious slides down the slope, climbing up to the top again rather panting, but with crimson cheeks. It was hungry work, and they sat down presently on some stones and ate all the buns, wishing they had brought more with them.

"I don't want to go home yet though," said Roy.

"Not a bit of it. We'll stay out as long as we can while we're here. Suppose we go right down this gorge below and try and climb on to that hill across over there. It looks as if it would be prime for tobogganing."

Roy was in a mood for adventure and ready to go anywhere, so the pair started upon another scramble, down a valley, and alongside a brook, and up into a wood till they found an even better place down which they could slide. How long they stayed they did not know, for time seemed no object, but at last it occurred to Louise that perhaps they ought to be turning homewards. The blue sky of the morning had changed to grey, the sun was hidden now behind clouds, and a few white snowflakes were beginning to fall. They must have wandered a very long way from the road, and it would need much scrambling to retrace the route by which they had come. It was difficult to persuade Roy to leave, and more difficult still to get him along; he stopped for any excuse, to break icicles, to jump over fallen tree trunks, or to throw snowballs into the frozen stream. And meantime the snow was falling faster. It came whirling down from a white sky in



large soft flakes that quickly laid an extra covering over the ground. The footsteps by which Louise was endeavoring to find their path back were soon untraceable.

"We must hurry on, Roy," she said. "Do you remember where we came down into the wood?"

"Along there somewhere I think. Weren't there some fir trees?"

"Oh, no! I believe it was much farther."

"There was a rock."

"Well, there's no rock up there."

Faster and faster came the snowflakes, whirling round till trees and everything seemed blotted out in a wall of white. In all their South African adventures the Ropers had never encountered any experience so bewildering as this. They groped their way blindly on uphill, hoping somehow to reach the road. Then all of a sudden Roy, who was slightly ahead, slipped on a loosened stone, clung desperately to a rotten bough which broke in his hand, and tumbled rolling over and over till his fall was broken by the bole of a tree. Louise scrambled to him through the snow.

"Are you hurt, Roy? What is it?"

Her brother was sitting up and rubbing his foot.

"Strained my ankle I believe. It feels precious queer. I wonder whether I can stand on it. Oh! I say, it *does* hurt."

Here was a castastrophe! Out in the thick wood, among whirling, blinding snow, their path lost, the night falling fast, and Roy scarcely able to limp along. To climb higher was impossible.

"Let us go down again and follow the stream," said Louise. "It must lead somewhere, and perhaps we shall find a farm or a cottage. Take my arm and I'll help you."

Slowly and painfully they made their way back into the gorge and began to follow the course of the little brook. It was hopeless, they knew, to sit down in the snow. At all costs they must push on towards shelter. Darker and darker grew the wood, and quicker and bigger whirled the snowflakes.

"Lu! I don't believe I can go any farther," said Roy, at last. "You'd better hurry on and leave me."

"Leave you!! A nice idea. I certainly shan't do that. We'll stick together anyhow whatever happens. Hello! What's this in front of us? It looks like a cottage. Come on, Roy, just a few steps."

Encouraged by the hope of getting help Roy managed to limp a little farther. They had reached what was certainly a cottage, though whether it was inhabited or not seemed doubtful. No light gleamed in the little window and the door was padlocked. They both shouted, but no one replied. Apparently the place was quite shut up and deserted.

"We've got to get inside somehow," murmured Louise.

She examined the door and found the framework so rotten that by the aid of a stone they were able to knock the staple of the padlock from the decayed wood and to wrench it out. Desperate need gave them ingenuity and strength. They pushed open the door and entered. Everything within was dark and silent.

"Wait a sec. I believe I have my flash in my pocket," said Roy.

After much fumbling he produced an electric torch and turned on the switch. By its light they could see the interior of the deserted cottage. It had long ago been abandoned for living purposes, but was evidently used as a storehouse, for a heap of turnips lay on the floor, and at the far side was a great pile of dried ferns, probably placed there as reserve bedding for cattle. It was at least a refuge from the storm and the gathering darkness outside, and they thankfully shut the door and took shelter. Roy pulled off his boot to ease his foot, which had swollen considerably, and with his sister's help dragged down a quantity of fern for couch and coverlet. The torch was waxing feeble and could not last long. Very soon they would find themselves in the dark.

"We shall have to stop the night here," said Roy.

"I wonder what they're thinking of us at home," said Louise, with a sudden lump in her throat.

To the young South Africans, accustomed to camping, and to many experiences in the bush, a night in the deserted cottage was no very out-of-the-way adventure. They decided that as soon as it was light they would be able to find their way to some farm, and meanwhile they would make the best of the circumstances, and keep themselves warm with bundles of bracken. They were so hungry that they each took a turnip to eat, and lay among the ferns munching their rather hard and indigestible supper till Louise's sense of humor made her burst out laughing.

"We're like bullocks in a stable chumping our mangel-wurzels. Or the ox and the ass on a Christmas card."

"You're the ass then," grunted Roy sulkily. His ankle was hurting more than ever, and his temper was always his weak point. Moreover he remembered that at home there would be mince-pies for supper.

"It's your fault for insisting on going so far," he finished.

"Well, I like that! It was you who wouldn't hurry back. And then you were clumsy enough to slip and fall. We should have climbed up into the road but for that."

"Oh, put it all on to me!"

"I shan't speak to you again, cross patch. I'm tired and I'm going to sleep. Ugh! It's very cold."

Lying among the bracken in the lonely cottage the pair slept and woke in the dark, and slept again, until at length the night wore itself out and a faint, a very faint, dawn began to show outlines of objects. Louise sat up and looked around her. The principal light seemed to be coming from a pane of glass in the roof, and not from the little window at the side. It disclosed a large barn-like room, with a loft at one end. In the big fire-place were some charred sticks and ashes, the remains of a former fire, a few coils of rope hung on the walls, but all furniture or traces of human habitation had long since been removed. Louise, feeling very stiff, rose from her fern-bed and threw open the door. To her surprise she saw nothing but a great wall of snow, some of which began at once to fall into the



house. She shut the door again with difficulty, and turned to her brother who had awakened at the noise.

"Roy," she said, with a catch in her voice, "we're snowed up."

Roy limped painfully across the floor to inspect for himself, but there was no doubt about the matter, door and window were buried in a deep mass of snow which had drifted during the night and piled itself against the front of the cottage. To make a way through it would be impossible, for it seemed to be high above their heads. For all practical purposes they were in a white prison. They looked at one another with scared faces. They were cold and hungry, and the prospect of remaining captives until the snow melted was appalling.

"I suppose Dad will come to hunt for us," faltered Roy.

"Yes, but he won't know where to look, and probably they'll never find this cottage," answered Louise, with a shiver.

"What must we do?"

"There's nothing for it but to stop where we are. We can't get out through that drift."

They each had another turnip for breakfast and a handful of snow instead of a drink. As the day went on the light grew a trifle brighter, though the glass pane in the roof was obscured with a coating of snow. Louise found a ladder, and placing it against the loft went to explore. After feeling about on the floor she gave a joyful exclamation.

"What have you found there?" called Roy.

“Onions! A whole heap of them. I’ll bring some down. They’ll be a change from turnips anyway. Thank goodness we needn’t quite starve.”

It was something indeed to have food of any kind, and a shelter. Whether it was yet snowing outside they had no means of judging: the white wall still blocked the door and the lower window.

“If only we could make a fire” mourned Louise. I’ll never go out again without a box of matches in my pocket—never!”

“The electric torch is done too, so we’ve no more light,” said Roy.

Very, very slowly the hours passed. It must have been about three o’clock when Louise, who, to try and keep warm, was moving about the cottage, began to investigate the old fire-place, and putting her hand up the wide chimney made a discovery. On a ledge among the bricks lay a box of matches! No diamonds, rubies, or pearls could have been so welcome. To the imprisoned pair they were more than untold gold. Not only did they represent warmth, but possible escape, for smoke rising from the chimney might reveal their presence in the cottage to someone outside. They heaped bracken into the fire-place and tried to strike a match. Alas! it was damp and only gave a feeble fizzle. The second and the third match met with a like fate. Then Louise remembered a little piece of camp lore to the effect that damp matches can be dried by rubbing them in your hair. She tried the experiment, and oh, joy! the fourth match blazed into a brief flame, just sufficient to kindle a piece of the bracken. In a

## Captain Peggie

few minutes the pile was alight and smoke was pouring up the wide chimney.

The warmth was most grateful and cheering, it seemed almost like a human presence. They knelt close by with their hands to the blaze, for the moment ardent fire-worshippers.

Suddenly Louise sprang to her feet and listened.

"I thought I heard a shout," she said. "Very far off. Oh, there it is again! They've come to find us. Call, Roy, call! Let us both shout together."

The smoking chimney had evidently betrayed their whereabouts, for after another lapse of time during which help was probably fetched, there came a noise of shovelling and scraping, as if spades were digging through the drift. The daylight was waning, but presently a lantern flashed outside, and through a tunnel in the snow a man descended and cleared the door.

"Are you all right here?" he asked, as he entered the cottage. "We've been looking for you since day-break. We'd never have thought of the old shed if we hadn't seen the smoke. Hello, sonny! Sprained your ankle? That's bad business. We shall have to carry you I suppose. It's a mercy you managed to break this place open and get inside last night. We thought you were buried somewhere in the woods. Come on, both of you, we'll soon have you home now."

Search parties from the town and from the country round about, including bands of Boy Scouts, had been hunting everywhere for the wanderers. It had been most difficult to trace them, for few people had seen them, and it was scarcely known in what direction they

had started. Moreover the snow had hidden all their tracks. A laborer had reported noticing them tobogganing down a slope on the previous morning, and from that scanty clue the rescuers had been led to the gorge. By a prearranged signal shots were fired to let other searchers know that the missing pair had been found. Louise and Roy were taken to a farm near, and comforted with hot tea and a meal, after which they were driven back to town along snowy roads in the farmer's gig.

It was the look in her mother's eyes and the sight of her father's white face when, worn out with tramping the hills, he returned to rejoice over the recovery of his children that made Louise realize the agony her parents had undergone during the night and day that they had been lost. The old Louise was inclined to be proud of her adventure, but the new and more thoughtful Louise saw the other side of it all.

"We've had a real taste of an English winter," boasted Roy, resting his sprained ankle on the sofa. "I wouldn't have missed that snowstorm for worlds—now I'm back. It's something to talk about, isn't it? Specially when it's over."

"Ye-e-s! It's over—for us. But I don't think Daddy and Mums will ever quite forget it," said Louise slowly. "Roy, I never knew before that they cared so awfully about us. It makes me feel I want to do something for *them*. A family is a wonderful thing. Peggie's always rubbing Brontë into me, and calling it a big family. I didn't understand what she meant—I do now."



## CHAPTER XI

### *Louise Explores*

Captain Peggie returned to Somerton on the 22nd of January, more than ever determined to make the name of Brontë shine in the annals of the college. The house team had not done its duty yet on the hocky field, and must be urged to greater efforts, and there were several other "distinctions" that might be gained and *ought* to be gained if everybody would take the trouble to try for them. The laurels to be picked during the spring term were of a rather different kind from those culled at Christmas. Among the girls it was generally called the "culture term", because Miss Penrose, considering the school had had enough fun over the December plays, dropped the drama in favor of art and music. There were lectures and recitals given at the school by professionals, and there were special classes held to study the lives and works of celebrated painters and composers. Each house started "study sheets"—large pieces of water-color paper upon which any girls who were clever at drawing or painting copied photographs or pictures having a relation to the special subject. Several girls might combine to produce one of these sheets, and an exhibition of them would be held in the

big studio, later on, when "distinctions" would be given for the best.

First on the list of lectures came "Modern Europe and its Political Re-adjustment" by Professor Bruce-Forsyth, M.A., a rather stiff subject at which the school was inclined to "jib", but which Miss Penrose said was "a necessary part of the education of every woman who would ultimately have a vote." So the embryo citizens of the empire were marched to the large hall, and took their places in readiness for instruction on European politics, whispering to one another, while they waited, upon matters of much less depth, until warnings from prefects and teachers produced an instant hush. The professor was coming. His footsteps resounded already along the corridor. Every eye was ready to mark his advent, and every pupil was prepared to rise courteously at his entrance, according to the custom of the college. The door was flung open by Miss Penrose, looking large and important, and with rustling skirts.

"Young ladies! Professor Bruce-Forsyth!" she announced.

Now the floor of the hall was highly polished and as slippery as glass: the lecturer ought certainly to have been warned about it. Instead of making a dignified and impressive entry, the poor little old professor, preceded by a shower of books and papers, skated into the room on his hands and knees, sliding quite a considerable distance up the aisle towards the platform. It was so totally unexpected and so very surprising that I grieve to say some of the girls began to laugh,

though the next moment they remembered their manners and checked themselves. Miss Penrose flew to the assistance of the unfortunate lecturer, helped him to his feet, ascertained that he was not seriously injured, and bore him away for some creature comfort until he should be sufficiently recovered and calmed to deliver his discourse.

He returned at the end of about ten minutes, walking with wary footsteps, and ascended the platform in safety. Some of the elder girls were interested in his subject, but it was above the heads of the generality. He was one of those withered little leaves of the tree of knowledge that seem lacking in sap; he had bitten deeply into the bread of learning, and had apparently found it indigestible provender, to judge by the dryness of his mental outlook. He talked in a big booming voice like a fog-horn, emphasizing his remarks by raps upon the desk, giving much technical information about the boundaries of Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia and the importance of preserving the balance of power in Europe. Peggie, who found it all dreadfully dull, was amazed to see Louise and her neighbor Joyce jotting down notes with the utmost diligence. It was a surprising development for Louise, and Peggie wondered what could possibly have inspired her cousin to show such an interest in foreign politics.

"You liked the professor's lecture?" she asked curiously afterwards.

"Couldn't understand a single word of what he was driving at, stupid old duffer," replied Louise irreverently.

Then what were you taking notes about?"

"I taking notes?"

"Yes, you and Joyce were scribbling hard all the time."

Louise threw back her head and laughed.

"We were playing a game," she confessed. "I'll teach it to you, Pegs, because it comes in very handy when one has these dull lectures. I bagged 'even' and Joyce bagged 'odd'. We waited until the professor got to the end of a sentence, then we wrote down his last word, and counted the number of letters in it. If they were even I scored, and if they were odd Joyce did. You've no idea what sport it is. I won by twenty-three points. I hadn't time to listen to the tiresome old lecture, I was busy waiting for last words. I advise you to try it. It's ever such fun."

"Louise Roper, you are the absolute limit," burst out Peggie. "Nobody but you would have had the impudence to make up such a game in school. Suppose Miss Howard looks at your notebook?"

"She won't. We're not to be questioned about the lecture. I found that out beforehand. Besides, I've got all the last words down, and I could put little squiggles in front of them like shorthand and say it's a private phonetic system of my own, you know."

"Private rubbish! It wouldn't take Miss Howard in. She's no simple babe."

"Well, it's always possible to lose one's notes. Don't worry, Peg o' my Heart, I shan't get into hot water this time, though I own I'd as soon Miss Howard didn't tackle me on the subject."



Miss Howard, Louise's form mistress, was of a rather big and bullying type, with large teeth and a "toothy" pronunciation. Teaching was not really her vocation, in spite of excellent degrees, and girls to her were nothing but the necessary nuisances by means of which she earned her daily bread. She was not fond of Louise, indeed she regarded her as the fire-brand of the form, and was inclined to lay more to her charge than was always quite fair. It was easier, when things went wrong, to turn upon the general scapegoat and presume that she was at the bottom of the mischief, than to trouble to investigate the matter, and as nine times out of ten Louise was implicated, she naturally received the blame of the tenth time as well.

On the morning after Professor Bruce-Forsyth's lecture, some of the members of III B were early in their classroom. There would have been plenty for them to do in the way of taking last looks at not-too-well-prepared subjects, but they put their books inside their desks and started ragging. Minnie Allison, of Cavell, and Jean Hawtree, of Nightingale, had an old-established feud with Louise, and there were certain scores which they wished to pay back. The fun began in quite a mild and good-natured manner till Minnie dropped pencil shavings down Louise's back. These were scratchy and uncomfortable; Louise tried to retaliate; Jean came to the defence of Minnie and the two together pushed Louise by main force into the book cupboard and locked the door upon her. Now this cupboard was Miss Howard's sacred shrine, into which she alone, as priestess, was permitted to enter.

She kept exercise books on the shelves, and ink, and maps, and colored chalks, and other school necessities which were given out as occasion demanded, but were never to be touched by the sacrilegious fingers of the girls. To be a prisoner in this "holy of holies" was a doubtful experience, and to be caught inside it would be as compromising as being detected in the Mint or in the strong room of the Bank of England. Louise, very upset and angry, thumped loudly against the door. Nobody likes to be shut up, and she had an almost gipsy horror of being trapped.

"Let me out! Let me out!" she shouted.

But Minnie and Jean, on the other side, only giggled and triumphed. "Who's got the better now?"

"You're locked into the den of lions."

"I can roar though and I'll scratch if you don't mind."

"You can't touch us through the door."

"Oh, can't I? We'll just see about that."

In the top of the door there was a ventilator, made of laths of wood that sloped outwards and downwards. It admitted a little light, and now Louise's eyes were accustomed to the gloom she could manage to distinguish objects inside the cupboard. There was a stool for reaching to the top shelf, and just behind her there was a big bottle of ink. She uncorked this, and climbing on the stool reached the level of the ventilator.

"*Will* you let me out," she demanded again in imperious tones.

"Not till you ask prettily," sniggered a voice below.

"Then take this."

And through the shafts of the ventilator poured a

stream of Stephens' best blue-black ink, splashing the bobbed flaxen hair of Jean and the upturned face of Minnie, and trickling in a broad track down the door. At that most inauspicious moment Miss Howard entered the room. Minnie had the presence of mind to turn the key and open the door before she fled to her desk, thereby disclosing Louise, mounted upon the stool, with the tell-tale ink bottle still in her hand. For a moment there was an awful silence. The teacher, too much overcome to speak, seemed to choke with indignation, but she soon recovered her voice and used it with much effect. As one of the girls said afterwards, "Some people get quite eloquent when they're angry."

Miss Howard, judging the culprit had been caught red-handed, and not knowing that she had been locked into the cupboard, made no inquiries, and blamed Louise alone. After pouring forth a hot tirade of wrath she finished:

"You're not fit to be in a ladies' school. Anything more unladylike I never saw. Look at the door. Look at your companions. Minnie and Jean, go and wash yourselves. Eileen, take the duster and wipe up that mess. Louise will write five hundred lines as a punishment, and will stay in for the next two Saturday afternoons. Now, not a word. I don't wish anybody to interfere. Be quiet and go to your desks."

Several girls had been on the verge of offering some excuse for Louise, and shifting part of the burden of blame on to Minnie and Jean, but those astute damsels had beaten a hasty retreat and the code of the form forbade "sneaking" against the absent. Moreover when

Miss Howard said "not a word" she meant it, and woe betide the unfortunate who ventured to raise her voice in protest. Even Louise herself, interviewed afterwards at an indignation meeting, admitted they could not have helped her.

"When Miss Howard goes off the deep end there's no stopping her," she sighed philosophically. "She was judge and jury and gave the verdict all in a minute and she won't listen to any appeal. It makes no difference. May as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. I should have got five hundred in any case. I mind the Saturdays much more. It's stupid hanging about the house when everyone is out. But if it can't be helped it can't, and there's an end of it."

It was not quite the end of it however. Minnie and Jean, raggers though they were, had some vestiges of consciences. They considered Louise was a "sport" not to have accused them to Miss Howard, and they cast about in their minds how they could make it up to her. They could not write her five hundred lines, but they might ameliorate the other part of her punishment.

"We must each stay in next Saturday afternoon, Jean," decreed Minnie. "Oh, it's easy enough to have a little headache or a cold. Then we must both ask leave to go to Brontë with a message. We'll stop as long as we dare and cheer Louise up. She can be quite surprised to see us."

"Oh, very surprised," twinkled Louise.

"Right-o, we'll come. I expect Miss Sheppard will let us stay a while and not be nasty about it."

It was really quite a heroic self-sacrifice for Minnie



and Jean to give up that Saturday afternoon, but as honor demanded it they were loyal to Louise. With little difficulty they framed excuses, and received permission from their hostel matrons to visit Brontë for the purpose of returning borrowed books. Louise received them gleefully.

"Everybody's out—even Miss Sheppard," she said. "Come in. Nobody will forbid the banns. I wasn't told I mightn't have visitors, and if you have leave you're within bounds. So why not?"

"I've never been inside Brontë before," giggled Minnie, looking round curiously.

"No more have I," said Jean. "What are your dormitories like?"

"I'll show you round the house if you care to see it," volunteered Louise. "*We* think it's A 1."

So they began a tour of inspection and she showed them the dining-hall, and the recreation-room, and the dormitories, and the bathrooms; and Minnie and Jean admitted they had points, but considered Cavell and Nightingale were far superior.

"Ours is the most modern house of all; it has the very latest improvements," said Minnie.

"Nightingale is the next newest. I shouldn't like these low rooms. The house must be very old," said Jean.

"Old! Of course it's old!" retorted Louise. "That's what we're so proud of about it. It was the manor at Somerton hundreds of years before the college was ever dreamt of. It's an ancient Tudor house, or Stuart

at any rate. It has the date 1678 carved over the back door. Think of the people who must have lived in it."

"Ugh! I should fancy ghosts. Do you ever see any?"

"No, I can't say we have ever seen any." (Louise's voice sounded almost regretful.) "But, as Peggie says, there's an 'atmosphere' about an old house. You always feel you may hear the swish of hooped skirts and catch a glimpse of powder and patches some day."

"Old houses sometimes have secret hiding-places."

"I know. I haven't heard of one here. And yet—there's something I've been wanting to investigate only I've never had time. I wonder if you'd care to help me?"

"What is it?"

"Well, I've often thought there might be a space between Dormitory 3 and Dormitory 4. The passage looks so long, but when you go inside the rooms they're not as big as you'd expect. Suppose we take a yard-tape and measure the walls, first in the passage and then inside the two rooms. Will you hold the tape at one end?"

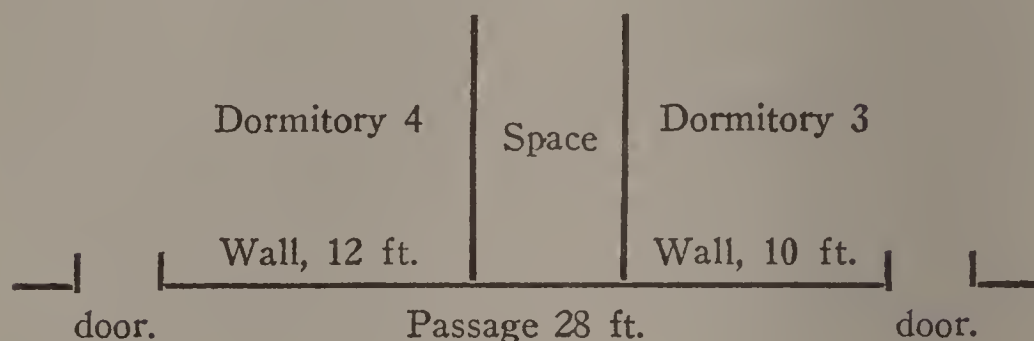
"Certainly, if you like."

"I have one in my raffia basket. Bother! I left it in school at sewing. Well, I shall borrow Joyce's. She won't mind. Have you a pencil and paper, Jean? Then you shall write down the measurements. We'll begin at the door of No. 3."

The girls set to work as systematically as land surveyors. They measured the passage between the doors of No. 3 and 4. Then they measured the corresponding

## Captain Peggie

inside walls of the two dormitories. The results showed a discrepancy. While the passage was 28 ft. from door to door, No. 3 was 10 ft. and No. 4 was 12 ft. Now  $12 + 10 = 22$ , which left a space of 6 ft. unaccounted for. Louise drew it carefully out on a plan:



There was not the slightest doubt that a considerable gap must lie between the two dormitories. The discovery was most thrilling. Could it be a cupboard? Or a cistern-room? Or even a secret hiding-place? The house was old, and ancient manors sometimes possessed such retreats for time of need. Where was the entrance to it? The girls, with renewed vigilance, searched the inside partition walls of the dormitories to try and find a concealed door. If such had ever existed it had long ago been sealed up and papered over. There was not a trace of anything of the kind to be found. They made another experiment. Minnie and Jean stood by the partition wall of No. 4 while Louise in No. 3 knocked loudly at what would be the other side if there were no space between. Her raps could hardly be heard, proving conclusively that the gap of 6 ft. must exist. Fearfully excited, the girls deliberated as to any other possible means of investigation.

“I know! Let’s try the attic,” said Louise at last.

This was a part of the house that was certainly not free to schoolgirls, but they felt the exigencies of the case ought to give them a passport. Something worth finding out might be upstairs and their curiosity could not be curbed. So aloft they went up the forbidden staircase, creeping past the servants’ bedrooms in case of a surprise from one of the housemaids, and going along the landing to the boxroom. Piles of trunks were stored here for the term, but there was a passage between them leading to another and smaller door. It was fastened by bolts, but these were easily slid back. The room beyond was pitch dark and apparently empty. Louise went in a little way, but as she could see nothing she returned.

“We want a light,” she declared. “Wait for me here, and I’ll go and fetch one.”

She returned in a short time with the lantern which was used at Brontë to escort the girls to rehearsals at the big recreation hall on dark nights. She had also brought matches and kindled the candle inside. Rather fearfully the girls began to explore. There was nothing in this attic except a few pieces of lumber, but it contained another door leading into a further “Blue-beard’s Chamber”.

“What a waste of good space,” said Louise. “I wish Miss Sheppard would let us use one of these for a dark-room. We can’t do our photos properly in the bathroom. Hello! What’s this?”

She had been poking about as she spoke, lantern in hand, and now fell on her knees to examine the floor.



## Captain Peggie

"A trap door, by all that's wonderful!" she exclaimed. There was fortunately a ring in it, so after several mighty tugs the girls managed to lift it. Louise held the lantern and peered into the pitch dark depths below.

"Now the question is whether we're looking into the secret room or not," she said. "We must test it. Minnie will you go downstairs and knock on our doubtful 6 ft. of wall and Jean and I will listen if we hear you?"

Minnie departed to do the errand, and in a short time several very brisk and decided taps resounded below.

"O-o-h! It sounds like spirit-rapping," shivered Jean, who was rather nervous in her dim surroundings.

"Spirit-rubbish! Hello, Minnie! Is that you?"

A faint "Hello" in response quite established the connection. There seemed absolutely no doubt that they had found the entrance to some hitherto unknown and hidden chamber.

But rooms are not usually entered from the roof, and to investigate their find was another matter.

"I'm going down to see what's there if I die for it," said Louise stoutly. "Wait for me while I fetch something I want."

"Don't be too long. It's creepy here," begged Jean.

"I'll be as quick as I can. You may keep the lantern. Here's Minnie, anyhow."

Louise came back chuckling and armed with a large and thick coil of rope and a board.

"What do you think it is?" she asked. "Why, it's the swing. It was stored away for the winter in the

tool-house, so I just borrowed it. I'll sit on the seat and you must each hold one of the ropes and lower me."

"Easier said than done," hesitated Minnie.

"Oh, nonsense, you can! Don't be a gubbins."

As Minnie had prophesied, it was not a particularly easy performance, but it was managed at last, and Louise, clinging tightly to the ropes and holding fast the lantern, was somehow lowered into the room below. She went with a run the last few feet, and plumped on to a particularly dusty floor. Luckily her lantern did not go out, neither was she hurt, so she jumped up and began to explore. The little chamber was about 6 feet by 10 feet, and had probably originally been a dressing-room, or possibly a powdering-room in the days when it was the fashion to have white hair. There was an evident door leading to Dormitory 4, which must have been blocked up and papered over on the other side. There was an old bureau at one end, with several drawers. Louise opened these and saw bundles of faded letters and some garments that had belonged to a little child, a tiny shoe, a lace-edged cap, a muslin dress, and a pink silk sash; there were a few toys too, an ancient wooden doll, dressed in a fashion of long ago, a ball, some miniature teacups and saucers, and some carved wooden animals. She shut the drawers with rather a gulp in her throat. They were unmistakeably the treasures that a mother lays by when a dearly loved little one has crossed the divide and needs its toys no longer. There had been a similar drawer

in her South African home, where a wee sister had once come and gone again. How long was it since the owner of the lace-edged cap and the pink silk sash had played with that wooden doll? A century and a half at least must have passed away, and the names of mother and child were alike forgotten.

"What have you found?" asked Minnie and Jean, who were peeping through the trap door above.

"All sorts of interesting things."

"I don't think we dare stay any longer. We must be getting back or there'll be squalls. Shall we pull you up again now?"

"I suppose you'd better."

When they tried however they found it is one thing to lower a substantial girl of thirteen, and quite another matter to haul her back. Louise was no light weight, and Minnie's and Jean's combined strength was quite inadequate to lift her. They made several attempts, but after a few feet they dropped her again each time.

"You're too heavy for us. What's to be done?" they called down anxiously.

It was a most awkward predicament. Certainly Louise could not be abandoned and left in the secret room, yet to fetch help meant to confess all they had done. They had hoped to be able to shut the trap-door again and return to their own houses without being involved in any trouble.

"There's nothing for it but to go and see if Miss Sheppard has come back," groaned Louise, who had

found the succession of flops on to the floor a painful experience.

Minnie and Jean, aghast and grumbling, groped their way across the two dark rooms to the boxroom, and from thence downstairs, where after a hunt in what was to them a strange house, they eventually found the hostel mistress, who had just returned. She at once took a candle and went with them to the attic. After peeping down through the trap-door and ascertaining the depth below, she left Jean and Minnie to cheer the prisoner and departed to find some means of extricating her. It seemed a very long time before she returned, bringing two gardeners who carried a short ladder. This they managed to lower into the little chamber and placed firmly in position, whereupon a most dusty Louise climbed thankfully forth.

Naturally the discovery of the secret room made an immense sensation in the college. Miss Penrose herself came to investigate, descended the ladder, and removed the contents of the bureau, bringing them up in a large basket. From the bundle of letters, dated 1770 to 1795, she judged that the little garments and toys belonged to the late eighteenth century; they were objects of very great interest, as such articles are rarely preserved for such a length of time, and she caused them to be placed in the school museum, where the girls crowded in to look at them.

Louise, Minnie, and Jean, owing to the extreme value of their exploration, did not get into the trouble



they deserved, and indeed were rather the heroines of the occasion.

“ I wish *I*’d found it !” sighed Captain Peggie. “ Why didn’t *I* notice the passage was longer than the rooms and measure them ? I never even thought about it. It seems to me other people do all the nice things at Brontë, and I never get a look in. I’d have given *worlds* to have the credit of this. Louise is a clever little person ; there’s no doubt about it—a handful, of course, but still decidedly clever.”

## CHAPTER XII

### *A Lantern Conference*

If the subject chosen by Professor Bruce-Forsyth appeared dull to some of his hearers, there were other lecturers that term who made amends.

There was Mr. Broadway, who gave a most delightful series of lantern lessons on Early Italian Art, and showed slides of beautiful pictures by Botticelli, and Raphael, and Michael Angelo, and Fra Angelico, and Titian, and Correggio, and other painters whose names had been unknown to the girls until they were introduced to these masterpieces. Then there were lectures on musical appreciation, with illustrations on the piano by Miss Mena Duncan, a gold medallist of the Royal Academy of Music, who had an exquisitely delicate touch, and taught her audience how to enjoy the works of the great composers. Best of all was a recital given by Signor Caviano, a brilliant Italian pianist, who was performing at the concert hall at Baddesley Wells, and was persuaded by Miss Penrose to come to Somerton College and hold a special matinée for the girls. A few of the older ones had heard him before, and spread such reports through the school of his wonderful playing and his personal charms, that every house was full of excitement at the prospect of his arrival. One mem-

## Captain Peggie

ber of the Sixth, who was lucky enough to possess a photograph of the star, hit upon the enterprising notion of exhibiting it, admission one penny, proceeds to be given to the School Photographic Society, the funds of which were in a languishing condition. Barbara had a brighter idea still, which she communicated to the others. Once a week the girls were allowed to order certain things which they wanted from Baddesley. "Carrier's Day", as they called it, was on a Wednesday, and the recital was to take place on Thursday. Spring blossoms are no doubt very tempting in chilly February weather, but it seemed a singular circumstance that on this occasion practically every girl in the school ordered flowers. They arrived in such quantities one would have thought a harvest festival was in progress. They were carefully put away by their owners and cherished until the morrow, for what object remains to be seen. The captain of each house appeared to have received private instructions which she handed on to her own particular flock.

"Is it to be before or after?" asked Joyce.

"Barbara says *before*," answered Peggie. "You see afternoon recitals are so often cold and sleepy, and we want to warm him up and make him enthusiastic before he begins. If we only do it afterwards we may get one extra encore perhaps, but the programme will be finished, and our demonstration could make no difference. Get him in a good temper at once and he'll play like an angel. Barbara has common sense. I quite agree with her about it."

"So do I. Mine are violets. What are yours?"

"Two lovely pink roses."

On Thursday afternoon, precisely at 2.30, the school was seated and waiting at attention in the large hall. Every girl looked excited and interested, and all faces were turned towards the door. The pianist, as was the custom at Somerton College, was ushered in and introduced by Miss Penrose, who announced: "Young ladies, Signor Caviano."

The handsome, dark-haired Italian who entered was quite romantic-looking enough to justify schoolgirl enthusiasm. Two hundred and thirty pairs of young eyes gazed at him with admiration, and as he walked up the aisle, between rows of girls, to the platform, a chorus of voices called: "Benvenuto! Benvenuto, signor!" (Welcome! Welcome, sir!) and he was pelted as he passed with showers of fragrant flowers.

With a merry little laugh he stooped, picked up as many as he could, and carried them on to the platform, where he placed them on the piano. Then with a most polite foreign bow he said in rather broken English:

"Young ladies, I thank you for giving me a so pretty welcome, and in my own language! I have been at Nice at the 'Battle of Flowers', but never have I received so many thrown at me as today. Again I thank you. Now I shall give you my best at the piano. When I like my audience it is easier for me to play."

The signor justified his words. His performance, far from being cold and sleepy, was most impassioned and full of fire. Those who had listened to previous performances in Baddesley declared they had never



heard him play so exquisitely. He quite surpassed himself at the end, for he gave as an encore an improvisation which, he assured the girls, was inspired by their lovely flowers, and was meant to convey the impression of "Fair Maids and Blossoms." The school was immensely flattered at receiving an original piece composed on the spur of the moment for its benefit, and Signor Caviano departed amid a perfect furore of applause, to which he again bowed, smiled, showing a set of perfect white teeth, and waved a delicate agile hand as he passed from their midst bearing with him a selection of the flowers. The girls were in raptures, but Miss Penrose, greatly amazed at this unexpected demonstration by her pupils, demanded explanations.

"I asked if we might put a few flowers for him on the platform, and you said there would be no objection," answered Barbara.

"A few flowers! Why, you must have thrown bushels! It was like a floral fête or a wedding. We don't generally give gentlemen quite so much attention here. Of course I meant a few vases of flowers placed upon the platform. However, he was very pleased, and he gave us an absolute treat in the way of music. His own piece at the end was really perfect. But, Barbara, you must consult me next time before you prepare such a reception for any of our lecturers or performers. It's not done."

"Isn't it? I'm very sorry," blushed poor Barbara.

The friends to whom she confided the rebuke rejoiced that Miss Penrose had not known beforehand of their intentions.

"She'd have stopped it I suppose," said Freda. "After all, why shouldn't we? He liked it, and it certainly made him play. He took one of my roses away with him."

"And my camellia. The kids picked up all the flowers that were left and pressed them. I wish he'd write down the music of 'Fair Maids and Blossoms' and publish it."

"We'd buy two hundred and thirty copies, at this school, and everyone of us would learn it," agreed Freda, with enthusiasm.

After the signor's wonderful performance even dear Miss Mena Duncan's playing seemed a little tame, though she gave them delightful illustrations from Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, and tried to open a musical debate upon the relative value of the composers. It was then that Helen made her famous remark that Mozart seemed almost trivial after Beethoven. It was listened to with respect by Miss Duncan, who encouraged the girls to criticize, and Helen was so inordinately proud of it that she repeated it afterwards till her chums were ready to turn and rend her.

"You've told us that before," they remonstrated. "It isn't anything so very much. Anybody could have said that."

"Then why didn't they? You all sat as mum as mice, and never opened your mouths. Somebody had to make a remark. It was a lesson on musical appreciation."

"And finished with Helen-appreciation," laughed

Enid. "You've got a jolly good opinion of yourself, old sport."

Helen was not an entire favorite at Brontë. Since the brief fortnight she had spent as head of the house she still considered she was a kind of deputy-captain, and always took the lead and tried to exercise authority if Peggie were not there. Many of the girls much resented this, they had no wish for two captains, especially as Helen was more domineering and less tactful than Peggie, and they took rather a pleasure in ignoring her commands. Foremost among the mutineers was Louise. She had always disliked Helen, and though original causes of quarrel were almost forgotten, there was little love lost on either side. At present quite a trifling matter was sufficient to raise the flame of rebellion. Peggie's practising time was altered and was now 6.15 to 6.45. As she was out of the room at the close of preparation, Helen took it upon herself to make some very stringent rules about the instant putting away of books and papers and the tidying up of the table.

"It must be done *at once*, when the bell rings!" she decreed. "I shall give you two minutes to clear your things away, and if anything's left it will be confiscated. All waste paper goes straight into the fire, so I warn you."

Some of the girls, out of sheer contrariness, liked to loiter and moved their possessions in a very dilatory fashion.

"Come, come, Louise," said Helen, one evening growing more and more aggravated at what she could

see was intentional slowness. "Put those books together properly and take them to your locker. There! I knew you'd drop your pencil. Don't be half the night picking it up. Make haste, can't you? You won't have time to change for supper if you don't hurry."

Louise, grumbling, emerged from under the table where she had been groping for her lost property, gathered her books and papers in a hasty heap and tossed them into her locker. Next day, when she went into "Modern Geography" class, she discovered to her consternation, that the careful map of European countries which she had drawn last night, was no longer inside her atlas. She apologized to Miss Howard for its absence, said she must have left it on the table at Brontë, and asked to be allowed to bring it afterwards, a concession which was rather ungraciously yielded to her. But when Louise hunted at the hostel for her map, lo and behold it had utterly vanished. Nobody remembered having seen it. Louise in frantic concern appealed to Helen.

"If you left anything on the table it's your own fault if it's lost," replied the deputy-captain airily. "I put all the waste paper in the fire as usual. I certainly didn't see a map amongst it, though."

"Then where is it?"

"How should I know? If you weren't so careless, you wouldn't lose your things."

Louise departed in a furious tantrum, perfectly persuaded that Helen had burnt her map on purpose. She confided her grievance to some of her chums, and persuaded them to hold an indignation meeting about it.



## Captain Peggie

As it would be difficult to talk undisturbed in the sitting-room, or in one of the dormitories, she suggested that they should retreat with the lantern to one of the dark attics, which, to her romantic mind, seemed a suitable spot for a private conclave. Joyce, Violet, Rosamond, Kathleen, and Betty were the chosen malcontents, and retired with much secrecy up the stairs and through the boxroom, to the first inner chamber. They would have gone farther, but the door leading to the inmost room was locked, and the key was safely in Miss Croft's desk.

Feeling rather like conspirators, they sat in a circle on the floor with the lantern in their midst.

"I vote we make ourselves into a society," began Louise. "I don't see why, because we're the juniors of the house, we should be sat upon by Helen. I'm not going to be trampled any longer."

"She is the limit," agreed Violet.

"So conceited." (Joyce.)

"So fond of bossing." (Rosamond.)

"So rude about it." (Betty.)

"And she's not captain either." (Kathleen.)

"It's simply abominable of her to have burnt my map. It's no use her denying it. She did it. Sherlock Holmes couldn't persuade me she didn't. These things can't be allowed to go on. We must retaliate. That's what people do in war time, and this is practically war. Helen must be brought to her senses."

"Couldn't you tell Peggie about it? She's captain," suggested Kathleen.

A strong and well-founded suspicion that Peggie

would adopt methods strictly in accordance with law and order caused Louise hastily to veto this proposition.

"It's not fair to drag Peggie into it. She wasn't in the room at the time. It's far better to manage the matter ourselves and let Helen see we're not going to stand her tyrannical nonsense. We're all equal members of Brontë, and one is as good as another. If Helen spoils our things we must spoil something of hers. Then she'll know we're not to be trifled with."

It sounded so dignified and grand that Louise drew her head up and tossed back her hair to give effect to her own words. The others assented, though rather cautiously. It was Louise's map that had been lost, not one of theirs!

"What d'you want to do?" asked Betty bluntly.

"What does she value most of anything?" asked Louise in return.

After some cogitation Rosamond suggested "her Bible" and Kathleen "her new Prayer Book", neither of which were articles which anyone could with decency purloin.

"She's proud of her study sheet," said Joyce, at last.

Brontë was competing for a distinction at the exhibition which would be held at the end of the classes on celebrated painters. Helen's drawings and paintings were quite clever, and among the large sheets of paper pinned round the sitting-room wall hers was so far decidedly the best.

"The very thing!" declared Louise, with a bounce of satisfaction. "We must pull her old study sheet

down and burn it. A most excellent idea, Joyce. I give you credit for it."

"Oh!" replied Joyce. "And who's going to do it?"

"Yes, who's going to do it?" echoed the others.

They all looked at Louise, as if expecting her instantly to accept the responsibility, but she did nothing of the sort.

"We must draw lots," she said darkly. "That's what people always do in secret societies. Have you a pencil, Joyce? Thanks! I have a piece of paper here. I'm going to tear it into six pieces, and make a cross on one and leave the others blank. Then we'll fold them and shuffle them and draw. Whoever gets the cross must do the deed."

"You'll very likely get it yourself," sniggered Betty.

"It doesn't follow in the least. But whoever does must keep it absolutely to herself. None of us is to know who gets the fatal slip of paper. Do you understand me? It's a point of honor to ask no questions and make no remarks. You look at your paper, then tear it up at once. One of us is the chosen hand of vengeance, and she must do her deed secretly, with no witness by and never, never reveal one single word, even under torture."

Really Louise was enjoying herself very much indeed. It was as exciting as plotting for an empire, or outwitting the Kaiser. With a face of solemn satisfaction she prepared the lots, shuffled them well, and placed them in her lap. The others drew first, and she herself last. She eagerly examined her slip. It was a blank. The cross had fallen to somebody else, who was hence-

forth destined to be the avenger. Without any comments the girls tore their papers to shreds, and taking the lantern returned to civilization.

Louise fully expected next morning that Joyce or Violet or Rosamond, who shared her dormitory, would get up very early and creep stealthily downstairs. Whichever of them it was she meant to pretend not to hear her. Nothing of the sort however happened. All three slept peacefully until the bell rang, and dressed without any undue haste. The lot must certainly have been drawn by Betty. No doubt she had been up betimes and accomplished what was necessary. Louise peeped into the sitting-room on her way to breakfast, quite sure that Helen's study sheet would be missing from the wall. No! There it was, still in its old place. Oh, well! Perhaps the "avenger" had not found a suitable opportunity to remove it secretly. In a hostel of twenty-five girls it is no easy matter to get rid of witnesses. Later on no doubt it would be taken away. All that day Louise waited for the great sensation, and all the next, but the study sheet remained where it was. Then the disagreeable truth forced itself upon her—whichever of her five confederates had received the paper with the cross had failed to execute what was required of her.

"The sneak! She's afraid. She thinks that she can hide behind the others and that no one will guess who she is," raged Louise. "I'll let her know what I think about her. I'll call another committee meeting in the attic and make them take an oath. I hope they feel ashamed of themselves."



## Captain Peggie

With the ardor of a parliamentary "whip" she collected her chums and suggested a lantern conference in the dark lumber-room. One and all they jibbed at the idea.

"We shall certainly get caught."

"Miss Sheppard missed the lantern last time."

"And Lena asked what we were doing upstairs."

"It's so fearfully dusty."

"If we want to talk, why can't we talk in No. 5?"

So, much against her will, Louise abandoned the Guy Fawkes part of the proceedings, and retired unromantically to her own cubicle. It was quite tame sitting on the bed, instead of squatting on the floor among the shadows of the attic. Environment has a great effect, and her friends seemed no longer impressed with the solemnity of the affair.

"What's the matter?" asked Kathleen crossly.

"Matter indeed! I've told you. Someone has sneaked. Whoever drew that cross hasn't done her duty. I wish I knew which of you it was."

The five looked at one another blankly.

"You said nobody was to know."

"You said it was a point of honor to ask no questions."

"And to make no remarks."

"And never to reveal a single word."

"You called it a big secret."

"So I did," answered Louise, "but of course I thought one of you was going to *do* it. I never dreamt you'd all turn traitors."

"We haven't all turned traitors."

"Well—one of you then."

"That doesn't make any blame on the rest."

"Why don't you do it yourself?" suggested Betty.

"It's not my job when someone else was chosen. But if you like we'll draw lots again."

"Oh, I don't think we need do that!" (Violet.)

"Let things stay as they are." (Joyce.)

"It's my practising time and I must scoot," said Rosamond. "Sorry I can't stay any longer."

"Yes, and I want to look over my Latin," said Kathleen, moving hastily from the bed.

The meeting broke up without any satisfaction to Louise, whose chums hurried away as if glad to go. They seemed completely to have forgotten the incident of the burnt map. Much sympathy one got from one's schoolfellows! There was evidently no depending upon them at all. They were fair-weather friends and would desert her just when she needed help most. In this cynical frame of mind she began to walk downstairs. She was passing the captain's room when Peggie called to her.

"Is that you, Lu-lu? Come in, I want to speak to you. Look here! Does this thing by any possible chance belong to you? It has L. R. in the corner."

Louise's face was a study. The object which her cousin held out for inspection was her missing map.

"Yes—it's mine. Where did you find it?" she stammered.

"I found it days ago, under the table in the sitting-room. I'd just come in from practising, and you'd all gone upstairs. So I picked it up and popped it inside

a book and meant to give it to you, and then I forgot all about it till this moment. I hope you haven't been wanting it?"

"Miss Howard was raggy, but I can take it to her to-morrow."

"Oh, I'm so sorry! I never thought about it again. It's a nice map, Lu. Why don't you do a study sheet?"

"What's the use? I can't draw anything as well as you."

"That doesn't matter; it's the pleasure of it. Besides mine isn't the best by any means. Helen's is the one that ought to win the distinction."

"If Helen's had been out of the way would *yours* have won?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"Suppose hers had been burnt by—by—accident. Would you have been glad?"

"*Really*, Louise, what a question to ask. Of *course* I shouldn't. As long as Brontë gets a distinction it doesn't matter who wins it. As a fact, if Helen didn't send in her study sheet, Nightingale would probably come out top. I saw Doreen Henshaw's yesterday, and it's better than mine, though not so good as Helen's. I'm not clever at laurel-plucking. Not that I care if someone else at Brontë can do it."

"Always Brontë first?"

"Certainly, always Brontë! Surely you think so too by now, in the middle of your second term? It's far more fun to all work together for the house than each for herself."





"ALWAYS BRONTË FIRST?"





"And you really think Helen's study sheet has a chance of distinction?"

"Indeed I do."

"Oh!" (Louise's eyes were fixed upon her map.)  
"She's rather a blighter, though not so bad as I thought her. It's a mercy on the whole that somebody was sneak."

With which enigmatical remark she turned her back upon Captain Peggie and stumped downstairs to show her recovered property to her five friends.

## CHAPTER XIII

### *A School Mystery*

While winter still held sway, and nights were dark and windy, strange things began to happen at the college. There was a tremendous gale one afternoon, blowing with such terrific force that the girls could hardly struggle back from the Central Buildings to their own houses. The Brontë contingent arrived flushed and breathless, darting into the porch like ships steering into a harbor, and all exclaiming at the velocity of the wind.

"I could hardly keep my feet."

"Thought I was flying."

"My algebra blew away, and I couldn't go after it."

"And I lost my handky."

"I declare it makes the house rock."

"Hope the chimneys won't come down."

"Miss Croft says she never remembers anything like it."

"Well, no more do I."

Still rather panting and ruffled, the girls sat down to tea, but hardly had the cups been passed round when a fearful crash resounded from upstairs. Miss Shepard ran to investigate, and came back with the news that a chimney pot must have fallen, for there was a

small hole in the roof of Dormitory 2 and some pieces of broken tile and slate on the dressing-table. Here was an excitement. The occupants of the dormitory, Lena, Esmé, Gracie, and Cicely, could not possibly sleep there in safety, and other arrangements must be made for them for the night. So after supper their mattresses, pillows, sheets, and blankets were carried down to the sitting-room and placed upon the floor, which seemed the only possible way of accommodating them in the emergency. Half inclined to grouse, and yet giggling at the novelty, the four homeless ones retired to bed in these fresh quarters. The gale had somewhat abated, and though the night was still windy, there seemed to be no further danger of falling chimney pots.

"You can all sleep with easy minds," Miss Croft told everybody. "There will be no more accidents now, so don't think about such things."

Lena, Esmé, Gracie, and Cicely, in spite of mattresses on the floor, were soon in the land of Nod, and continued there for several hours. Then Cicely suddenly awoke. What had disturbed her was the insistent ting-ting of the telephone bell in the hall, just outside the door. All the hostels were connected by telephone with the Central Buildings, but it was a rare thing indeed for anyone to ring up during the night. Next, she heard steps in the hall, and Miss Croft's voice calling an answer to the message, then their door was opened, the electric light switched on, and the house mistress, clad in a blue dressing-gown, came hurriedly in.

"Girls, I'm sorry to disturb you," she explained, "but the fact is there has been an attempted burglary



at Austen, and as this room is on the ground floor and the windows have no shutters I think it is better for you to go upstairs."

"Oh, dear! Where are we to go? Back to No. 2?" asked Esmé, only half awake.

"No, we must ask some of the girls to give you hospitality. Come along, and we'll see who'll take you in."

School beds are not generally wide enough for two, but on this particular occasion Dormitory 5 proved generous, and each occupant moved to the side and made room for a guest. Glad to be accommodated anywhere, the poor girls snuggled thankfully in, hoping there would be no more disturbances, and that possible burglars would at least leave Brontë in peace, whichever other hostels they might choose to rifle.

Next day the whole story was out. Some of the girls at Austen declared they had heard footsteps on the leads outside their dormitory window. Nancy Lowe had been brave enough to peep out and had seen a light. She at once gave the alarm, and the hostel matron had telephoned to the other houses to put them on their guard. The burglar, finding himself disturbed, must have decamped, for he had not effected an entrance and nothing was missing. All the same the incident was very alarming and disturbing. It was the first time anything of the sort occurred at Somerton, and Miss Penrose at once reported the matter to the police. Meantime shutters were ordered for ground-floor windows, and masons were busy patching up the roof of Brontë and fixing on a fresh chimney pot.

Everybody was in a state of scare. A clothes-brush

dropping from the hat-stand in the hall was enough to cause a panic; the girls imagined masked faces peering through the windows, and the scratching of a mouse behind the wainscot was construed as the filing of bolts.

Watches, bangles, and any little pieces of jewelry belonging to the girls were safely hidden away for fear of robbers. Miss Sheppard talked seriously of obtaining leave to keep a dog at Brontë, to defend the premises, but Miss Croft, who wished to allay the general panic, declared there was no further need to be afraid now the police had the matter in hand.

They still had scares with mice and falling clothes-brushes, and the worst of it was they received no sympathy at all. Miss Croft and Miss Sheppard, acting on instructions from head-quarters, pooh-poohed any fears, assuring the girls that a burglar who had failed to do anything but put everyone on the alert was hardly likely to repeat his visit in the near future, and told Brontë not to give way to nerves.

"You're like a lot of early Victorian schoolgirls, shrieking at mice and afraid of your own shadows," declared the matron. "Do show a little strength of mind. If a burglar comes again I shall expect you to capture him. It would be some distinction for Brontë if you could do that, instead of merely screaming."

This remark gave Louise an idea. She confided it to her particular chums.

"If the Shepherdess wants the house to have an opportunity of showing pluck and courage and twentieth century womanhood and strength of arm and all the

rest of it, I vote we give it her. I think she deserves something for being so scornful. A little bit of a scare would do her no harm, and we could play up no end. They'd enjoy it when it was over. Listen, and I'll tell you what I mean."

Three fair heads and three dark ones bent very closely together in a whispered conference, and with occasional chuckles of merriment a highly ingenious plot was hatched. The first stage necessitated a visit to the school theatrical wardrobe, and the borrowing from Barbara, the custodian of the costumes, of certain garments.

"We expect to be having a 'social' at Brontë with just a few charades," explained Louise demurely, as she made her choice.

"It's quite right, take anything you like," said Barbara, who was in a good temper. "So long as you bring them back within three days you're welcome to them."

"We shall only need them for one night, thanks."

Louise wrapped up the parcel, brought it surreptitiously into Brontë and stowed it away in No. 5. Then she and her confederates set to work to pave the path for the surprise which they meant to spring upon the innocent and unconscious house. They began at tea-time by leading the conversation to the subject of burglars. Rosamond told the horrible story of "The Pedlar's Pack", a North Country legend of last century, in which a long bundle, left at a lonely farmhouse, is found to contain not yards of calico but a robber; Violet capped the tale with an equally gruesome experience in another lonely farm, where a clever

little girl, in the absence of her father, had outwitted a highwayman and locked him into the cellar. Louise related a modern adventure in a Paris hotel, when a beautiful adventuress, posing as a countess, had crept into the rooms of other guests and stolen their jewelry, and Joyce gave particulars of an exciting visit of brigands to a villa in Sicily. These narratives, as the conspirators had hoped, created the right atmosphere. When dusk fell the girls began to be a little nervous.

"I'm glad the shutters are up on the lower windows now," remarked Esmé, with a shiver.

"Yes, but we haven't any on the upper ones," said Violet.

"Surely those are safe?"

"I don't know. I suppose somebody could bring a ladder."

"Or sneak into the house earlier and hide," added Louise.

Preparation and practising went on as usual that evening. There is nothing very alarming in sitting doing lessons in company with your friends, but when it came to going upstairs to change their dresses for supper, certain weaker vessels showed strong early Victorian tendencies. Cicely peeped timorously into the big cupboard on the stairs, half expecting to see a villainous face peering from among the coats which hung there; several girls looked carefully under their beds, and Pauline, despite her love of fresh air, shut and bolted her window. It was nearly supper-time, and almost all the girls, with the exception of Louise, were



## Captain Peggie

in the sitting-room, and were waiting for the gong to sound, when suddenly into the midst of them ran Violet.

"Oh! Oh! Come quick!" she gasped. "There's someone upstairs. I—I saw a man on the landing."

The news was like a bombshell. Some faces went pale. Cicely began to cry and cowered behind Esmé.

"We'd better tell Miss Sheppard," said Peggie quietly.

"All right, run and tell her. But if it's a burglar I vote we go and capture him," declared Joyce valiantly. "Surely the lot of us could 'do' for him. Who'll come with me?"

"I will," cried Rosamond.

"And I," said Betty, with spirit.

"And I," added Joan.

"Come along, all of you, then. Don't leave us to go alone. Show what stuff you're made of."

The courageous champions forthwith raced upstairs, closely followed by the rest of the house, who were not to be outdone in pluck. On the landing, just emerging from Dormitory 2 was a masculine figure with a dark moustache, clasping a variety of pilfered articles in his arms. At sight of the girls he bolted back into the bedroom. But Betty, Joan, Rosamond, Joyce, and Violet darted forward, forced open the door which he was holding, threw him to the floor, and seizing quilts from the beds rolled him up tightly, so that he was unable to either kick or struggle. It was the work of hardly more than a minute."

"What's the matter," cried Miss Sheppard, who had

been summoned by Peggie, and who now came pelting along the passage.

"We've captured a burglar," answered Joyce. "Will you please come and look at him. He's here on the floor—rather a desperate character too, I should say, by the way he kicked."

Miss Sheppard peering down at the prostrate figure by the bedside was deceived perhaps three seconds, then stooping she relieved the burglar of his black moustache.

"Get up, Louise," she said tartly. "You're a very silly set of girls. I won't have practical joking here. You know that perfectly well. Take off those clothes at once, Louise. You'll have your supper in your bedroom."

"But we were very brave, weren't we, Miss Sheppard?" ventured Joyce. "You know you said if a burglar came you'd expect us to capture him. Won't this mean a distinction for Brontë?"

The matron turned upon Joyce with the eye of a lion tamer.

"I never allow impertinence. If this affair is your doing you can write out a hundred lines. And so can Louise. You can both bring them to me to-morrow evening. Go downstairs all of you, and understand once and for all that we're not to have another word on the subject of burglars. If I hear any of you speaking of such matters again you'll report yourselves to Miss Penrose. It's silly nonsense, and I'm completely tired of it."

## CHAPTER XIV

### *Royalty*

Towards the end of February there was a tremendous flutter of excitement at Somerton College. The Prince of Wales was announced to pay a brief visit to Baddesley Wells to unveil a war memorial, open a new ward at the hospital, lay the foundation stone of an orphanage and incidentally inspect parades of Boy Scouts and cadets. Every girl with a grain of patriotism in her wanted to see the Prince, and Miss Penrose was besieged with requests that the whole school should be taken into the town for the great occasion. She temporized till she could ascertain that satisfactory arrangements might be made for them, but finally consented. Later she had a most joyous announcement to make: the Mayor of Baddesley, recognizing the educational claims of Somerton College, had sent a special invitation to the head mistress and a selection of teachers and girls to be guests at the Town Hall, and witness the reception of the royal visitor. Was there ever such luck? True, the civic invitation was limited to twelve persons, and there were two hundred and thirty pupils in the school, but everybody felt that an immense honor had been conferred upon Somerton. Miss Penrose decided that the best representatives of the college

would be herself, two mistresses, and the captains of the nine various houses, who might justly be considered to have first claims to precedence. These favored few would be conducted to the Town Hall, while the rank and file, under close escort of teachers, should have places engaged for them on grand stands, or in shop windows where seats were to be hired.

Peggie, as Captain of Brontë, was in a whirl of delight. In all her sixteen years she had never yet seen royalty, and to take however humble a part in the reception of the Prince seemed an occasion to be remembered for life.

"I wish he'd been coming here to the college," she sighed. "Wouldn't we just have decorated the place for him."

"Rather! Couldn't we yamp up something to bring him? He might lay the foundation stone of a new cloak-room. I'm sure we want one," laughed Connie.

"I'd sooner see the Prince than even the King and Queen," said Dorothy.

"May we throw flowers?" asked Louise.

"No. After our fun with Signor Caviano we've got to behave ourselves, worse luck."

Of course the great day was a holiday. Owing to the enormous crowds which might be expected in the streets of Baddesley it would be necessary to start early and take their places in good time. Motor-buses had been engaged to convey them to town, and the specially invited ones were to go in two taxis, in charge of Miss Penrose, Miss Humphreys, and Miss Carthew. Oh, the excitement of starting off. Peggie was in the



second taxi, and sat beside the driver in front, because there was no room for her inside, where Miss Carthew, Rachel, Barbara, Nancy, and Phyllis made a tight fit. After the first mile they gained the main road along which the royal car was expected to pass, and here the decorations began. The little village of Aston (where the Prince was to salute a cyclists' memorial) was all *en fête*, with flags flying, hundreds of school children drawn up on the green, and crowds of people from neighboring parishes waiting patiently behind the barrier ropes. All along the way to Baddesley early comers were lining the road, and as they drew near the town the streets were thronged. It was impossible for the taxis to proceed far, so the party dismounted and walked. It was a most gay scene; citizens had shown their loyalty by hanging out Union Jacks; banners bearing mottoes of welcome stretched from window to window, garlands of laurels and paper roses adorned the balconies, and everywhere surged a sea of interested faces. Long rows of Girl Guides and Brownies, and of children from the Union Orphanages edged the pavement, protected in their position by the police, who maintained strict order among the sight-seers. Most of the youngsters held flags or colored balloons, so that the general effect was a medley of blues and reds and greens.

In good time as they were, it would have been quite impossible to cross the High Street and gain the Town Hall, but for the friendly help of a constable to whom Miss Penrose showed her card of invitation. With him to escort them the crowd parted and made a path

for them to pass, and they very thankfully reached their destination. Up the steps they went, and in through the great door, where their credentials were examined, and they were duly admitted and ushered forward by a magnificent official in a red and green uniform. Up the wide flight of stone stairs and along the handsomely panelled corridors they walked to the Council Chamber, where the reception was to be held. It was a splendid hall, with stained-glass windows, and coats of arms emblazoned on the walls, and wonderful carved canopies, and electric lights in Moorish chandeliers, and a marvellous clock decorated with gilt figures. It was already more than half filled with guests in gala attire.

All the seats were numbered, and stewards showed them to their places. These were rather to the back of the hall, for the front was reserved for members of the Corporation, but fortunately they were just opposite an aisle, so that they had an uninterrupted view of the dais. There were three-quarters of an hour to wait, and the girls had plenty of time to look round and admire the assembly, which included judges in wigs and gowns, gentlemen wearing medals and decorations of the Order of the British Empire, and ladies in every variety of fashionable hats. The Town Crier, clad in heraldic red and green, made a fine figure at the doorway.

Then the church bells began to ring, and presently a great clapping was heard outside. The procession was coming up the stairs. Everybody rose and stood. Oh! Oh! Here they were at last. First the Chief Constable, then the Sword Bearer and the Mace Bearer

## Captain Peggie

in full glory, then, cynosure of all eyes, entered the Prince, escorted by the Mayor and other dignitaries, and followed by the Aldermen in their scarlet robes and the Councillors in bright blue, all carrying cocked hats. It seemed like part of a fairy tale. The girls craned their necks to peep round the hats of those who sat in front. The Prince was being conducted on to the dais, and seated on the right hand of the Mayor.

"Isn't he a nice bright-faced boy?" whispered Peggie.

"Doesn't he look shy?" Rachel whispered back.

There was a speech of welcome from the Mayor, and a presentation, then the Prince rose and read his reply, quite simply and without any affectation. The little ceremony concluded, the procession passed out again amid tremendous applause, to the Mayor's parlor, where certain distinguished citizens were to be presented. During the five minutes occupied by this proceeding the party from Somerton managed to whip round through a side door and station themselves in the corridor, where they caught another glimpse of the Prince as he passed down the stairs.

"Just a splendid hearty young Englishman," said Miss Penrose enthusiastically. "He puts on no royal airs at all. Nothing could be in better taste. No wonder the people are cheering him outside. A pity it's all over so soon."

The Prince's car had whirled him away to unveil the war memorial and perform the other duties of his brief visit and the function at the Town Hall was at an end. Refreshments were ready for the guests in many of the rooms, and the girls, who had breakfasted

at 8 o'clock, looked longingly at piles of sandwiches and cakes, cups of coffee, and trays of ice cream. Miss Penrose left them with the two teachers to take what they liked, but herself hurried across the street to regulate the departure of a contingent of her girls who had seats on a grand stand outside the bank. Peggie, who did not happen to be hungry, begged to go with her. She wanted to see the fun in the square. They had forced their way across, and Miss Penrose was just motioning to her pupils to keep their places until the crowd grew thinner, when there was a commotion and a squeal, and a brown-clad figure came tumbling down the wooden steps of the stand and rolled on to the pavement almost at their feet. Of course it was Louise! Nobody else would have jumped up so suddenly and have tripped and fallen. It was always Louise who did tiresome and embarrassing things. A dozen people picked her up, and a constable hurried to the rescue. Seeing some blood on her cheek he whistled for the ambulance that was waiting in case of accidents, and before they could realize what had happened, Louise, Miss Penrose, and Peggie were hustled inside and whisked off to the hospital.

They were taken to the out-patients' department, where Louise was carefully examined by one of the house surgeons, who found no broken bones, only a grazed forehead, which he bound up with a bandage.

"Did you see the Prince?" he asked. "Well, if you'd care to see him again, I'll take you into one of the wards, for he's due at the hospital in twenty minutes. There's plenty of room."



## Captain Peggie

Who could resist such an extra treat? Even Miss Penrose smiled as the doctor led the way through many passages into Victoria Ward. The huge room was like fairyland, decorated with flags and streamers and balloons. As Royalty could not visit every ward, a large number of the patients and nurses were collected here ready to offer their greetings. Peggie and Louise were given places beside the bed of an old ex-serviceman, who, noticing the latter's bandage, asked if her injuries were recent, and was most interested to hear they had been received in welcoming the Prince.

Then more cheering was heard outside, and again entered the bright-faced, smiling, friendly young figure who was the centre of all the ovation. His keen eyes quickly noticed the ex-serviceman, for pinned to the hospital jacket was a card, bearing the words "One of the Old Contemptibles", and he came to the bedside and spoke to him.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" he finished.

"No, Your Royal Highness, thank you kindly. Unless you can spare me that flower in your buttonhole."

With a pleasant laugh the Prince drew out the rose and handed it to him, then moved on to visit other beds. Gunner Thompson looked at his gift with satisfaction, smelled it, and passed it to Louise.

"Keep it, missie," he said. "You deserve it for breaking your head to get a sight of him. Nay, take it. I asked for it for you. I'll be offended if you don't."

"Oh! Thank you ever and ever so much," cried Louise, with sparkling eyes.

She was the heroine of the day when they all returned to Somerton. The Prince's rose was put in a vase and exhibited, after which it was carefully pressed. The school museum was suggested as its ultimate destination, but to that Louise would not agree.

"I shall keep it myself, thank you," she said. "It isn't every girl gets the Prince of Wales' buttonhole."

"He didn't exactly give it to you though," urged several jealous voices.

"That doesn't matter in the least. I got it, which is the main thing, and what I've got I'll keep. So that's that!"

It is seldom that two stupendous events occur in one week in a school, yet after the royal visit on Wednesday came the great hockey match of the term on Saturday. The first eleven of Somerton were playing the Baddesley Ladies' Club. It had been an annual fixture for the last five years, and on each occasion, alas! alas! the club, which was composed of "crack" players, had scored the victory. Somerton had quite taken the matter to heart. The honor of the college seemed at stake. This year the team was absolutely resolved to "do or die".

"We'll have eleven stretchers ready, and we'll be carried back upon them if we lose again," declared Barbara desperately. "We've just *got* to win."

Nobody was more deeply interested in the match than Captain Peggie. She had concentrated much energy on hockey this season, and was in the second

## Captain Peggie

team. Though not so strong and sturdy as some of the girls she was a very quick runner, and generally kept her head in an emergency. The talk, on the day before, was all about the coming match and the chances of the school.

"By the by, Peggie," said Barbara, who was hockey captain, "I shall put you on as reserve for Nell. You're a good centre forward, old sport! Nell's a doubtful quantity for to-morrow—got one of her sniffly colds. So if you have to play—play up! That's all I can say to you."

The prospect of a chance in the first team sent Peggie's mental barometer soaring aloft, and when Saturday arrived and Nell's cold was declared too bad to allow her to take her place in the team, the reserve was in a state of much excitement.

"I can trust you not to let us down, Peggie," said Barbara.

"You may be sure I'll do my best," said Peggie. "I hope I shan't make an idiot of myself."

Brontë was immensely flattered that its captain should be among the elect eleven.

"You lucker!" sighed Dorothy enviously, "I'd give the Easter hols. for your chance. I wish somebody else would be taken ill, and *I* should be wanted as a reserve. Barbara didn't mention me, did she? I thought she might have done."

"She said nothing about you. I don't suppose she expects anyone else to crock up."

"Understudies never get much of a chance. But Barbara *did* promise."

"Promise what?"

"To put me on the reserve. You might remind her about it."

"I will if I can."

Punctually at half-past two the Baddesley Ladies' team arrived in a motor-bus, and were conducted to the hockey field. All the college were assembling to witness the match, and girls were hurrying up from every house. Brontë in a body escorted its champion.

"I wish I were playing," said Louise, as they walked over the grass. "I feel just like it this afternoon. I'd win for you."

She had been waiting outside for the others, with a hockey stick, and amusing herself by hitting a ball about, and she was still carrying this as she went.

"Don't fear, my good child! *You* won't be chosen at the eleventh hour as champion," laughed Connie.

"It's as well to be ready," retorted Louise.

"Considering this is only your second term how much do you know about hockey?"

"How much? I made a most mighty strike just now. It would have scored a goal if I'd been really playing. Look! I'll show you. I'm sure I can do it again."

Louise threw down her ball on the grass and made a tremendous hit, the ball flew forward with the velocity of a bullet, but at exactly that unfortunate moment Peggie, who was in front, turned round, and received the charge full in the face. At first the horrified girls thought she was blinded. They took her back to Brontë, where Miss Sheppard, skilled in first aid,



## Captain Peggie

bathed and bandaged her until the doctor, for whom she telephoned, should arrive. Peggie, still squirming from the agony of the blow, sent the others back to the hockey field.

"You must tell Barbara," she urged. "Ask her to let Dorothy take my place. Go, all of you, quick!"

There is nothing so painful as injury to an eye, and the doctor's examination was an unpleasant process for his patient. Mercifully he found there was no great damage done, the ball had struck the cheek but not the eyeball, and though she would have what is technically known as a "black eye", and some consequent inflammation, there was no danger of losing her sight. He put on a dressing and a bandage, and ordered her into the sanatorium for a few days, to keep her quiet. Here by special permission Louise was allowed to see her that evening. She had already been put to bed, but sat up, with bandaged head, to greet her cousin.

"Here I am, at same old address," she said brightly. "I seem fated to go to the sanatorium. I feel rather like the wolf-grandmother in this get-up. Don't be alarmed. I won't eat you."

"How's your eye?" asked conscience-stricken Louise anxiously.

"It'll be all right, Dr. Moore says. Miss Penrose has been a trump. Never mind my eye. Tell me about the match. I suppose the Club won as usual?"

"No, they didn't. We scored by one goal. And, oh! Peggie, it was Dorothy who did it. She took your place and played as if she were possessed. Everybody says

they never saw such magnificent play. The club forward was actually raising her stick to get a goal, when Dorothy shot up like a whirlwind and saved the school. The captain of the Ladies' Club said: 'That girl will be a champion some day'. Nobody knew Dorothy had it in her. She's quite surprised herself. You should have heard the cheers. Old Brontë was to the fore, I can tell you."

"How perfectly splendiferous!"

"We were fearfully sorry *you* were out of the running," continued Louise remorsefully. "Pegs, I don't know how I was such an utter Johnnie as to send that ball in your face. I oughtn't to have been ragging about with it then. The others have rubbed that into me. Can you forgive me? Will your eye really get well again?"

"So the doctor says. Don't worry, Lu. I shall be all right in a few weeks."

"I allowed you five minutes, and time's up," interrupted Nurse. "My patient must drink her hot milk now and go to sleep. Say good night to her."

Later on in the evening, when Nurse came to take a last look, she found Peggie repressing tears. "Is the eye painful; poor child?" she sympathized. "I'll give you an aspirin later on if you need it, but try and go to sleep without it if you can, won't you?"

"It's not so bad, thanks," gulped Peggie. "I shan't need anything, I'm sure." But to her pillow she added, when Nurse was out of hearing: "It's *not* my eye. Am I *never* to do anything for Brontë? It's always other

## Captain Peggie

people who do the winning. The captain doesn't seem to count. It was my biggest chance and I've lost it. Peggie Paget, what a selfish little beast you are. Instead of being glad for Brontë you're whining over yourself. Probably you'd have missed that goal. You don't deserve to be captain if you can't be more sporting than this. I'm ashamed of you. Find your handkerchief and dry your one sound eye and go to sleep."

## CHAPTER XV

### *A Shrove Tuesday Party*

For the winning part which Dorothy had played at the hockey match Brontë received another "distinction". It was not a crown of laurels this time, but a medal, with "Somerton College, Proficiency in Games" upon it, and was attached to ribbons of the school colors, brown and pink. Dorothy, who was public spirited, voted it to the hostel, and the girls pinned it upon a small notice-board (recovered with plush for the purpose) and hung it up in the hall.

"Really, if we go along at this rate we shall be getting quite conceited," exulted Connie. "Old Brontë has come on by bounds lately. She'll be the crack house of the coll. soon. I feel I trot about with my head in the air nowadays."

"*You* needn't boast particularly, old sport," said Enid. "You haven't gained any of the laurels. No more have I, for that matter. I can't write plays and win goals. But there's one thing I mean to try for—a costume prize on Shrove Tuesday. That's far more in my line. We'll jolly well buck up at Brontë and give them a treat. I vote we turn out in style."

The night of Shrove Tuesday was kept as a carnival at the college. The girls dressed in fancy costumes,



and all met in the big hall, where they spent what they called a "Mad Hatter evening", restrained only by the prefects. It was a point of honor to do something different each year, and Barbara, who as head of the school was leader of the proceedings, had decided that this time it should be a "celebrities" party. Everyone was to represent some famous person, ancient or modern, the funnier the better, because the function was not a solemn assembly but a merry-making.

Brontë, mindful of its growing reputation, determined to do its best. Some of the girls wrote home and were helped with their costumes by their mothers; others set to work to contrive ingenious things for themselves, and a few applied to Miss Penrose to be allowed to hire wigs for the occasion from a hair-dresser in Baddesley, who sometimes supplied the school with theatrical properties.

By six o'clock on the 5th of March (Lent was late this year) two hundred and thirty extraordinary individuals trooped to the big hall. Each was prinked out to the utmost, and wore what was called her "identity disc", a circle of cardboard setting forth the celebrity whom she represented. They were received in state by Barbara and Freda, arrayed as Father Neptune and his wife Amphitrite; the former (a rough old King of Sharks and Whales), in classical garb but decked with seaweed, barnacles, and shells, and a wig made of combed rope-ends, bore a trident of gilt cardboard, and was much henpecked by his lady, a variety of mermaid, who constantly smacked him on the back, and informed him: "Now, Neppy, my boy, you've got to

do what Wifie wants.” Charlie Chaplin, with large feet and corked moustache, acted herald to the god and goddess, proclaiming through a cardboard megaphone the name of each arrival, and after presentation every girl walked down the hall and tried her best to act up to the character that she was portraying.

Dorothy, who possessed what her friends called the “gift of the gab”, her bobbed hair carefully parted and powdered, and her person padded with cushions to fill out her suit, was Mr. Lloyd George, and mounted on a chair she held forth eloquently on matters of politics, trying to shout down Rachel Arnold, the Bolshevik candidate, who was proclaiming red riot.

“As a Russian I must speak my native language,” roared Rachel. “I am outsiki to overthrow everything-ski, especially this schoolski. Down with prefects. Down with teachers. Give us democracy. Abolish workski.”

“What about captains?” interrupted Mr. Lloyd George. “Our Russian friend will be obliged to abolish himself in the common ruin. Gaskell can’t ‘go red’ and own a captain. Now I’m here to speak about food supplies. Vote for me and your Sunday cakes will contain double the number of currants. We’ll grow our own baking powder and prohibit foreign muffins——”

“You want to tax my dinner,” heckled the Bolshevik candidate.

“No, no, my friend. I would never lay a tax on thistles,” said the suave voice of Mr. Lloyd George. “So go and hee-hawski in your own houseski.”

## Captain Peggie

The girls stood by to listen and laugh till other characters came along to claim attention. There was Helen as Julius Cæsar, a wonderful figure in a Roman toga, who passed by chanting in deep tones :

“I’m Julius Squeezer. I’m coming back as a ghost soon. Tootle-lootle-loo!”

Betty Yates, as Dr. Moore, the school physician, made great fun by offering enormous pills or drinks out of a medicine bottle. She carried a large bath thermometer with which she essayed to take temperatures, finishing with: “Now please to let me look at the tongue,” an unfailing request of the doctor’s when he visited at the sanatorium.

Winifred Chapman was Pavlova, in short full skirts of crinkled paper, and pirouetted about in imitation of the “Dying Swan” ballet, posing in extraordinary attitudes with much effect.

Gracie Clarke represented Signor Caviano, as he had appeared at the college, and entered bowing and smiling and pressing flowers to his heart, and adjourned to the piano, where he threw up long white hands with great affectation.

Maggie Fowler was dressed as the mummy of Tutankhamen, and was conducted by Pauline Webster who, as Mr. Carter, the celebrated Egyptian archæologist, exhibited his discovery in the fashion of a showman, descanting upon his various points of interest as a specimen.

Phyllis came as Madame Montessori, of educational fame, and was accompanied by Joyce, Rosamond, and Violet as baby toddlers, in socks and pinafore, carrying

large cardboard letters of the alphabet. The ex-Kaiser, a gruesome figure with fierce moustaches, walked arm-in-arm with Prince Ranjitsinhji, who carried a cricket bat. The Sultan of Turkey and his harem excited much mirth by the shocking behavior of the ladies, who "made eyes" over the tops of their eastern veils till he threatened to throw them into the Bosphorus.

Peggie, who was still obliged to wear a shade over her eye, had been puzzled as to what celebrity she could possibly represent, and had finally borrowed a leather motor-coat and leggings and a huge pair of motor-goggles, and announced herself as "The World's Champion Road-hog". She had a toy motor-horn, which hooted when she squeezed a bulb, and she dashed about the room noisily clearing a passage for herself in the style of a 60-mile-an-hour racing-car tooting pedestrians from the road. Her rival in energy was Nancy Cameron of Cavell, who, as "The Wandering Jew", also perambulated the hall, playing upon a Jew's harp, a most untuneful instrument with little more music in it than a comb and tissue paper. Connie, who posed as "The Man in the Moon," waved a large wooden porridge spoon and made mock love to Cleopatra, Florence Nightingale, and other ancients and moderns. A small girl from Greenaway had borrowed a big wash tub from the laundry, placed it on its side like a dog-kennel, and squeezing herself into it, made an excellent Diogenes, calling out cynical remarks upon the appearance of passers-by. Louise, after much thought, had sent for some of her cousin Nelson's



## Captain Peggie

clothes, had hired a suitable wig, and impersonated H. R. H. the Prince of Wales. It was "like her cheek" the girls said, but they could not help laughing, as she put on a "royal" manner, inquired kindly who they were and what she could do for them, and finally presented the rose from her buttonhole to Amphitrite, at which Father Neptune exhibited great jealousy, and threatened to fight the Prince with his trident.

For half an hour at least the various celebrities amused themselves with jokes about one another's costumes and characters, but after a while Barbara mounted the platform and, raising her voice above the babel, commanded silence.

"You are some of you aware," she said, "that this is Degree Day at the college. Queen and myself will now distribute our Shrove Tuesday honors. Please to take your seats and come up in order as called."

On a throne, improvised from chairs covered with a rug, Father Neptune and Amphitrite placed themselves, smiling affably, with a small retinue of courtiers behind. Charlie Chaplin, with the megaphone, acted as royal usher, and summoned those chosen to the investiture. Adela Swayne, who had been longer at Somerton than anybody else, was given the Order of the Crusted Barnacle, with the right to use C. B. after her name. Mary Wadsworth, the baby of the school, was awarded the Order of the Shrimp. On Muriel Spencer, the cleverest girl in the Sixth, was bestowed the Order of Minerva, and she was presented with a small ornament in the shape of an owl, to remind her of the bird of wisdom, which in classic lore accom-

panied the goddess. Nancy Millington, noted for her hearty appetite, was made a Commander of the Order of the Bath Bun, and an appetizing-looking specimen of the bun tribe was hung round her neck by a blue ribbon. The girls shrieked with laughter as she returned from the platform and generously offered bites to the bystanders.

The next to be summoned was Dorothy, on whom Father Neptune smiled broadly as he said:

"In view of valuable services rendered during the match with Baddesley Ladies' Club I have great pleasure in conferring on you the Imperial Order of the Hockey Stick. Will you kindly kneel." Then, as she prostrated herself at his feet, he touched her with his trident and proclaimed: "Arise, Dame Dorothy."

Olive Rowe, who could never be induced to run at games, was made a Knight Commander of the Order of Slowcoaches; and Winifred Chapman, in virtue of her success as Pavlova, was given the Imperial Order of Twiddletoes.

These were Court honors, but there were also University degrees to be conferred, and several surprised damsels found themselves suddenly elevated to be a Spinster of Athletics, a Mistress of Sports, a Doctor of Drama, or a Dame of Dancing.

"And have you nothing left for His Royal Highness?" asked Louise, when the stock of honors seemed giving out, "not even an Order of the Imperial Button-hole?"

"Get away!" frowned Father Neptune. "If you come an inch nearer to my beautiful Queen Amphi-

## Captain Peggie

trite, I'll nail you up in Diogenes' tub and toss you into the deep. Imperial Buttonhole, indeed! Amphitrite, dearest heart, I'll trouble you for that rose."

"No, no, Neppy, it's mine and I mean to keep it," bridled his partner, and the pair were still sparring amusingly when the school clock struck eight, and the big bell ringing loudly informed them that the time allotted to the carnival was over, and that the various celebrities must scatter to their own houses to become private personages once more and to partake of a belated supper before departing to bed.

"Three cheers for Neppy!" shouted the girls, as that monarch of the sea raised his trident in a parting classical salute. But Charlie Chaplin roared through his megaphone: "If you don't go instanter every single degree will be taken off you. We'd instructions to clear the room by eight and we prefects are responsible. Do you hear what I say! G—O! Go!"

After the wild excitement of Shrove Tuesday evening came Ash Wednesday and Lent, like a long peaceful Sunday after a mad Saturday. Miss Penrose did not wish it to be in any way a gloomy season, but she wanted the girls in the midst of their busy jolly school life to have a little quiet time to think about that higher part of themselves that lies hidden under all the fun. So for a while there were no romping parties or "House rags". It was not that these things were wrong at all, only that by their little bulk they were apt to fill the school world and shut out things that mattered much more. The school chapel was always open, and there was a table full of helpful books by the door. The

girls could go in for any chance scrap of odd time, and sit reading and thinking. After the hustle and bustle of the hostels it was a calm and uplifting atmosphere. There is nothing so good for any one as to get the habit of liking to spend at least ten minutes alone. Rubbing among our fellows is excellent and necessary character training, but an equally vital part of our experience are those snatches of time spent "on a high mountain apart", when the ordinary little life seems transfigured and we catch radiant joyous glimpses of something fuller and more perfect beyond.

March was especially a "nature month" at Somerton, when the girls were taken for rambles and encouraged to use their eyes and look about them at the miracle of the resurrection of the year. Many of them kept notebooks and wrote down the arrival of the first spring migrants, the finding of the first wild flowers, and records of insects, moths, mammals or reptiles which they might happen to have seen, together with cloud effects and local rainfall. After the long winter it was a change to go out into the woods; there was a thrill in the air and a feeling of bursting buds and opening flowers. Somerton was near to very beautiful scenery, and most interesting excursions were within the scope of a Saturday afternoon. Parties of not more than twenty were sent out with teachers, and enjoyed themselves immensely hunting for sweet violets or early primroses, and bringing home branches of chrome-colored catkins or silvered "pussy-willows".

On one of these "glad adventures" towards the close of March went Peggie and Louise, the former already



a trained "nature student", and the latter, who only knew South African specimens, very much interested in everything she found, though absolutely ignorant as yet of the names and comparative values of her treasures. Some of the girls laughed when she rejoiced over a celandine or pointed out a thrush singing on a branch, but Louise was never at a loss for a repartee, and would immediately go one better by descriptions of iguanas, white arum lilies and other wonders which might be seen on the veld near her old home.

Addiscombe wood lay in a valley between two steep hills and was of considerable extent. There were definite roads and paths through it, but there were great spaces of tangled fern and bushes among the trees, where it was difficult to push one's way. When hunting for specimens it was the easiest matter in the world to wander out of ear-shot of the others, and a much harder business to locate the party again. Peggie and Louise, to whom the byways of nature were the highways to happiness, set off in search of Arcadian nurseries, lured by the tweeting of a chaffinch in bridal plumage, and the tirra-lirra of a tiny wren that flitted among the swaying catkins. They scrambled through brambles and beds of deep ferns, amid "brake and briar" for a considerable distance, up a hill-side where green moss mingled with the long grass, and the last year's leaves lay thick as in autumn. Here, in the densest part of the wood, they came upon a surprise. It was no bird's nest, or coveted patch of primroses, but a roughly made wooden cross, on which were

carved the words "Jesu Mercy!" and underneath, in smaller letters, "Mary and Elizabeth—April, 1845".

It seemed a strange enough object to find hidden away in such a remote and tangled part of the wood. Why was it there? Surely there must be some story connected with it? The brief words were an insufficient explanation.

"We'll ask Miss Towers," said Peggie, turning away at last, "though how we're going to find her again goodness only knows! Where have we got to?"

Except that they must go downhill instead of up the girls had no idea of what direction to take, and soon realized that they were completely lost. They had hoped to regain the path they had left, but it had vanished, and nothing but endless trees and bushes remained. There was a fairy-tale feeling about it too, a mist was rising and crept among the brown trunks of the beeches like sprites and spectres. Peggie and Louise kept very close together, for to lose one another would be the last horror. They walked on merely to keep moving, and in the hope of eventually reaching a path. They were very quiet now, though occasionally Louise said "Don't lose me, Peggie!" just for the sake of hearing her own voice. Suddenly, through the silence, rang out the shrill clear note of a Guides' whistle. It was to their left and was repeated over and over again. The girls turned, and plunged in the direction of the sound. A few minutes' scrambling brought them to a clearing, and oh, joy! among the trunks of the trees on the farther side they spied the brown dresses of the school uniform. A most distracted Miss Towers, escorted by a flock who

## Captain Peggie

had not strayed, was searching for the runaways, and welcomed them with a scolding made sharp by anxiety.

"Don't you know how risky it is to wander off on your own? I thought you knew better, Peggie! Stop with the others, and never go out of earshot of my whistle. If you can't keep the ramble rules, you'll be left at school another time. We've wasted half an hour or more in hunting for you. You were looking for bird-nests! Oh, I daresay! But if we all spread ourselves out in a wood like this, we should never be collected again."

"Ask about Mary and Elizabeth!" whispered Louise to Peggie, but Peggie, subdued under the rebuke, did not dare to face a possible snub.

It was Connie who told them the story afterwards, Connie who knew the neighborhood and its legends. Nearly eighty years ago two little girls of seven and three years old had strayed from the village of Addiscombe and were missing. They had no father, and the mother, who went out to work, returned at dusk to discover the absence of her bairns from the cottage. For three weeks the whole of the district was searched for them, then a laborer, going to cut brushwood, came by accident upon the dead children, clasped in each other's arms among the deep fronds of the bracken. The neighbors had subscribed, and put a cross to mark the place. That was all!

"Would they have put a cross for us if we hadn't heard Miss Towers' whistle?" asked Louise, much impressed.

"You and Peggie are hardly 'babes in the wood',









smiled Connie. "But I'll tell you what I've heard. Some other quite wee children were lost once, and found their way home again. They told their mother that two little girls in white pinafores had come to them while they were crying, and had beckoned them on and on among the trees till they regained the path; then they had vanished."

"Mary and Elizabeth!" gasped Louise.

"Perhaps! Who knows? They may have been sent—to save other little girls. We don't know what happens over the borderland, and children sometimes see things that older people can't."

"I'd like to go again sometime, if we could find the place, and put some flowers on the cross," said Peggie.

"No! I should be frightened!" shuddered Louise. "Give me the African veld where I can see the sun or the stars, and I can find my way, but in your dark English woods I'm a babe. The robins would soon have covered me with leaves."

"But for Miss Towers' whistle!"

"Yes—but for the Guides' whistle!"

## CHAPTER XVI

### *Fortunate Pilgrims*

Easter was very late this year, almost as late as the Golden Numbers and the Full Moon and the Calendar will allow it to be fixed. School was to break up on the Tuesday before Palm Sunday, and would not re-assemble till the sixth of May, when everybody would come back with summer clothes, and prepare to start cricket and tennis. The month in between, with nature at her prime, would perhaps be the most enjoyable vacation of the year. The girls at Somerton certainly thought so, and with good reason. Miss Penrose, who believed in following up certain branches of education, had arranged, in continuation of the lectures on Early Italian Art, to take a select party of pupils for a three weeks' tour to Italy. It is naturally rather a big order for parents to send their daughters on such an expensive jaunt, but a few of them had responded to the typed prospectuses sent by Miss Penrose, and the urgent schoolgirl appeals that supplemented them. Foreign travel under the immediate protecting wing of the head mistress of Somerton was felt to be an "educational privilege" calculated to put a very fine polish upon the previous bed-rock of acquired information, and to add culture to learning. That at least was how the fathers,

who had to write the checks, looked at the matter. Ten jubilant girls, henceforth christened "the luckers of the school," described the proposed expedition as "gadding abroad with Miss Pen".

That she might join this most elect contingent never occurred to Peggie, but Louise's parents, who always did impulsive and surprising things, suddenly decided that a peep at Italian art treasures might help to make up arrears in their daughter's education, and was a unique opportunity of improving her mind before the family should go back to Africa; and, as a return for many kindnesses from the Pagets, they offered to send the two cousins together.

"Why! It seems too good to be true!" exulted Peggie, as Louise read her father's letter aloud. "I can't believe it."

"Dad was so upset at my nearly knocking your eye out. I expect this is to make up!"

"But my eye is all right again!"

"You might have had a glass one by now, but for luck! Anyway here we are, both of us with our names entered for the jaunt. Was there anything more splendiferous?"

The head teacher of French, who spoke Italian, and who was to have gone with the tour, was prevented by an attack of rheumatism, and Miss Millar filled the gap instead, much to the secret satisfaction of the girls, who greatly preferred her to Mademoiselle.

"Miss Pen can talk the lingo herself, so we shall get on all right!" said Peggie.

"We stopped at foreign ports on our way from



## Captain Peggie

Africa, and we bought heaps of things," said Louise. "We just pointed to what we wanted and held up some money."

"Barbara says she'll lend me a conversation book and I can learn up some sentences."

"Oh, that's all right so long as you don't get them mixed up and fire off the wrong ones. It wouldn't do to ask the chambermaid to drive faster and tell the taxi cabman to bring you some hot water."

"Hardly! But if we kept a conversation book handy we could always point to the right sentence and let the natives read it for themselves."

The contingent of twelve, five girls to each teacher, made a small and manageable party, which could be escorted about to view the sights without undue danger of dividing. With regard to luggage they were restricted to a suit-case apiece, and wore their usual brown school uniform, with the summer Panama hat.

The ten fortunate "Pilgrims", as they called themselves, were Barbara, Freda, and Edna from Mitford, Clara and May from Eliot, Mollie and Christine from Austen, Brenda from Cavell, and Peggie and Louise from Brontë. They started on the afternoon before school broke up, so that they scored an extra day's holiday. They departed in a motor-bus, a most excited little crew, for with the exception of Louise none had ever been out of England before, and this was a first plunge into the unknown. Their immediate destination was London, where they spent the night at a hotel, then next morning they were up betimes and caught the early boat train to Newhaven. Each girl, in addition

to her suit-case, was provided with a raffia basket holding a thermos flask and buns, biscuits and fruit for lunch.

"It's far wiser to take our own refreshments," Miss Penrose had said, "then we're sure of having something to eat. There's often a wild rush for the restaurant car, and girls would be crowded out. We'll have a picnic in our own carriage instead."

Now the clerk of the weather, who is very apt to make a muddle of his business, especially in England, ought to have booked blue skies for the 9th of April, but he left the matter to the usual chance, and when the travellers arrived at Newhaven, they boarded their vessel in pouring rain. It was very much too wet to stay on deck. Even the shelters were damp and desolate, and all the chairs were covered with tarpaulins. So down they went to the ladies' cabin, and scrambled with other people for the few remaining berths and sofas, securing places for six, though the rest had to take pot luck.

"Is it likely to be a rough passage?" inquired Miss Millar.

"Well, I'm afraid there'll be some sea on when we get out into the Channel!" replied the stewardess. "Better lie down at once if you're a bad sailor. You'll feel the motion less when you're flat on your back."

Poor Miss Millar *was* a bad sailor, and she took the advice, glad that the girls had "grabbed" a berth for her. Even in the harbor there was an unpleasant little rocking of the vessel, giving her the sensation of being on a see-saw. Miss Penrose, to whom fresh air

## Captain Peggie

was a fetish, looked desperately at the closed portholes, and seemed half inclined to escort the party on deck again, but showers of driving rain beating upon the glass urged a more prudent course.

"I'm afraid we're in for a bad crossing. Well, it won't last for ever! You must be as patient as you can," she counselled.

"If we could only breathe!" groaned Barbara, used to the ever-open windows of Somerton. "Is it always stuffy like this in the cabins?"

"Worse sometimes," said Louise, who in virtue of ocean experience felt qualified to answer. "That's to say when it's stormy. But don't begin to grumble yet. It will be as bad as the Black Hole of Calcutta before long, like it was on the *Dunbar Castle* when we crossed the Bay of Biscay."

"That's not the way to comfort me."

"I'm only telling you the truth."

They had all meant to stand at the side of the steamer waving good-bye to the shores of Old England in the orthodox romantic fashion, but through the wet portholes they could not even catch a glimpse of the receding coast, and could only judge by the throbbing engines and the growing motion that they were putting out into the Channel. Then what Louise called "the music" started. The cradle of the deep began to rock them in earnest, and the ship seemed trying as many tricks as a circus horse. Sometimes she pitched and sometimes she rolled, and unless you held tightly on to something you would find yourself on the cabin floor. Passengers, sick already, lay groaning on the sofas; a

baby was howling and refused to be comforted; two little boys, whose mother was too ill to look after them, ran up and down with unsteady footsteps; the stewardesses tried to be everywhere at once. Louise, who had gained her sea-legs on the *Dunbar Castle*, was not much affected; but poor Peggie, after valiant efforts to remember various directions for the avoidance of *mal de mer*, gave up the struggle and succumbed.

"They're a bright lot!" murmured Louise, looking round at the prostrate party. "Seems to me I'm the only sailor amongst us."

Even Miss Penrose was stretched upon a couch, and several of the girls had flung themselves on the floor, too ill to move. In the upper berth of a small cabin, that opened out of the stateroom, lay Barbara, her usually rosy face as white as chalk.

"How are you getting on?" asked Louise cheerfully.

"I shall die if I don't get some fresh air! You could cut this with a knife. Do you know how to open the porthole? I've been trying, but I can't."

The round pane of glass was exactly at Barbara's elbow—most tantalizing to one who was gasping in semi-suffocation.

"I could, but it's risky with that sea on!"

"Oh, just for a second! If I can only get one breath it will be better than nothing!"

Ignoring a passenger in the berth below, who was past remonstrating, Louise, despite the rolling of the vessel, climbed up and opened the little window. There was an instant rush of blessed air, the most heavenly thing in creation, but alas! Father Neptune played



## Captain Peggie

a rude trick on his one-time impersonator, for immediately afterwards in surged a wave, wetting Barbara considerably and sending a spurt of water into the cabin. Louise banged the porthole just in time to avoid a second disaster.

"There! I've done it! I thought that would happen!"

"Never mind!" gasped Barbara faintly. "Sea water doesn't hurt, and that breath of air has saved my life. Are we anywhere near Dieppe yet?"

"Hardly half-way across I'm afraid. At least so the stewardess says."

The boat was late, and when at last she sighted "La Belle France" and put into the harbor, our dejected party felt as if they had voyaged round the world. Looking limp and pale they dragged themselves through the Customs, but when their suit-cases had been duly examined for contraband goods, a formality which amused them, and a French porter, who took them all under his wing, had established them in two comfortable compartments, and an official had come and examined all their tickets, they began to cheer up. It is wonderful how soon sea sickness disappears once one gets on dry land again, and the world ceases to sway and rock. The color was coming back to Barbara's cheeks, Peggie was tying her hair ribbon, and the rest were setting their tumbled costumes in order like a flock of dishevelled sparrows preening their feathers after a storm. It was then that they realized Miss Penrose's wisdom in making each girl bring a thermos. Hot coffee and biscuits were exactly what they needed at the moment, and just what they could not have procured

on the train, which was serving a full course luncheon to those who could consume it.

"I knew, if we had a bad crossing, that you wouldn't feel tempted by soup and meat and vegetables. Eat the biscuits first, and you'll feel better, and inclined for the buns and fruit later on," counselled the Head.

It seemed a very long way from Dieppe to Paris, but it was the picturesque route through Normandy, and they passed blossom-clad orchards, moss-roofed farms, and groves of trees covered with branches of mistletoe, all so new and wonderful that it was occupation enough to look out of the window. French fellow travellers also added to the foreign interest. In the compartment which Louise and Peggie shared with Miss Millar, Mollie, Christine, and Brenda, there was a little elderly withered-looking Sister of Mercy, evidently full of a burning grievance against the head of her convent. She poured out woes to a friend in a torrent of talk in Norman patois, and so fast that the girls, anxious as they were to listen to a real French conversation, could scarcely follow the rapid flow, and only gathered that "La Supérieure" had been harsh in matters of discipline, and that the poor sister had started upon her journey without even a cup of coffee to support her. Her friend—a masculine friend, elderly, and possibly a relation—nodded his head gravely, and remarked "incroyable!" whenever a second's pause gave him the opportunity.

The one thing that Peggie realized was that the Sister had had no coffee. Her thermos was still half full, and—as she had brought an enamel mug for her

## Captain Peggie

own use—its lid was presentable as a drinking vessel. With a glance at Miss Millar for her permission, Peggie shyly offered hospitality. The sister was delighted, grateful, and so refreshed that the stream of conversation poured faster than ever, only now it was directed to the English party, much to their embarrassment, for none of them, not even Miss Millar, could understand what it was all about. They were rather relieved when she got out at Rouen, helped by the masculine friend, who took charge of her luggage and escorted her, still talking volubly, on to the platform.

The girls were rejoicing that they now had the compartment to themselves, and were scheming how by spreading out their possessions they could keep it thus select, when a porter opened the door and ushered in two fresh fellow-passengers. He placed their bags and packages on the rack, received his tip, assured them that they were right for the "Gare de Lyons", and left to perform other duties. The newcomers were of a type rarely seen except on local trains; they were old-fashioned country people who were going to Paris. The younger of them was a grey-haired woman of sixty, and the elder, shrivelled and bent and wrapt in a brown shawl, must have been considerably over eighty. She looked so feeble and old that the girls re-adjusted themselves to give her a corner of the carriage, and were not surprised to hear that it was the first time she had ever travelled by train. The younger woman explained that she had come all the way from Macon to Rouen, to fetch her mother, and was taking her back to live with her. Her husband had a farm, far up in



the country, and he would be waiting for them at Macon with a conveyance.

"Where's Macon?" Louise asked Peggie.

"In the south, going on to Lyons."

"A long way from the old lady."

"I should think so. I hope they get her there safely, poor old dear!"

Gran'mère, as the girls privately called her, nodded off to sleep in the corner, and in course of time the train reached Paris. Now the carriages where our party was installed were labelled Dieppe - Milan, and were shunted round by the circular railway to the Gare de Lyons, the great point of departure for all southern places, whence they would go through to Italy. There was no need to change in Paris, but as there was an hour to wait and appetites had recovered after the crossing, Miss Penrose marshalled her flock and took them for dinner at the station restaurant. This was a most magnificent place, with elaborate gilding and paintings on the walls, gorgeous electric light fittings, big mirrors, and red velvet couches. A string band was playing in the centre of the room, and sometimes above the noise of mingled conversation and music came the loud voice of a porter announcing the imminent departure of a train, whereupon certain guests would lay down knives and forks and rush to the door. The French dinner was amusing, and afterwards the girls bought packets of chocolates; then they were once more marshalled and carefully conducted back to their railway carriage. They were rather surprised to find the old lady still



## Captain Peggie

slumbering in the corner, and Miss Millar again asked the daughter the name of their destination.

"This train is going through Switzerland into Italy. I can't see how they'll get to Macon by it!" she commented, and in her best French she tried to explain the fact, even pointing out the places on a map which hung in the compartment. But no. Their companion either did not understand her or would not believe her. She replied that the porter had assured her she was perfectly right for Lyons and they had no wish to move. As she seemed to suspect that the English ladies were trying to oust her and her mother from their carriage Miss Millar could not persist.

"I wonder if I ought to ask the conductor about them? But surely some official will come and look at their tickets and tell them. They're in their own country, and we're strangers," she said, rather uneasily.

It was half-past nine now, and as soon as the train started, the tired girls settled themselves to try and go to sleep. Most of them had never experienced night travel before, and it seemed strange to draw the cover over the lamp and spend hour after hour in semi-darkness only broken by the bright lights of the stations through which they passed. Those who had corners were the lucky ones, and the rest had to find support by leaning against one another, not a very comfortable performance or conducive to sound slumber. Peggie dozed a little, but noises constantly woke her up again. The train was stopping at Dijon and porters on the platform were calling a warning to those who must change.

Miss Millar, still feeling worried about her fellow-travellers, suggested again that the train was not going to Macon, and that this was the last opportunity of remedying a mistake, but mother and daughter only smiled, and closed their eyes again. Plainly they did not mean to be turned out of a cozy compartment for all the English in the world. Then hour after hour the train went on, and the girls dozed and slept and woke and tried to stretch their cramped legs, and dozed again, till very early in the morning they crossed the frontier into Switzerland and arrived at Pontarlier. When the train stopped the two old Frenchwomen concluded they had reached their journey's end, threw open the door and inquired if they were at Macon.

"Macon!" exclaimed an official throwing up his hands with an eloquent gesture of despair, "Mesdames! Vous êtes en Suisse!"

Then there was a wailing and a whimpering as the poor horrified daughter and the infirm old mother realized at last they had been in the wrong train. Several porters helped them out, and when last seen they were being escorted to the waiting-room, where it is to be hoped they were consoled with hot coffee and eventually returned to France.

"I *do* blame myself for not insisting!" said Miss Millar. "I know I ought to have found the conductor and asked him. To think of that poor old thing having to get back to Macon, and then drive miles in a jolting farmer's gig at the end of it."

"How could they make such a mistake?" asked Peggie.

## Captain Peggie

"I believe I understand. The porter at Rouen told them they were right for the "Gare de Lyons", the big station in Paris, where they ought to have changed. They thought he meant they were in the train for Lyons, which of course is beyond Macon on the Marseilles route. But why nobody looked at their tickets in Paris I can't imagine. We manage things better in England."

The journey through Switzerland was naturally a great excitement. At one station the train stopped and passengers were allowed to alight to get coffee, which was served in little wooden bowls, brought on a barrow along the platform. This, with a roll apiece, constituted the girls' breakfast, for they had finished their buns and fruit long ago. Pine trees, mountains, then the great lake of Geneva, with its blue waters, spread itself before their enchanted eyes. Miss Penrose came and pointed out the famous Castle of Chillon, a picturesque mediæval building which one would not suspect of having horrible dungeons, though it was here that the captive languished of whom Byron wrote in "The Prisoner of Chillon".

"My hair is grey, but not with years,  
Nor grew it white  
In a single night,  
As men's have grown with sudden fears."

Then on and on again, through scenery which made them cry out at its beauty, till they reached the plain of Lombardy and finally arrived at Milan. It was just half-past one, and they had been travelling since nine

o'clock on the day before, so they were thankful to go to their hotel, wash faces and hands, tidy their hair, and have lunch. They were all tired, but the meal and some coffee afterwards restored their courage, and everybody voted for an afternoon's sight-seeing.

"Any girl who would prefer it may lie down on her bed," said Miss Penrose. "We shall have to-morrow morning as well for Milan, so you wouldn't miss the sights altogether, though of course there's much to be seen. Peggie, you look worn out! Hadn't you better rest?"

"No, no, please!" protested Peggie. "I'm perfectly right and longing to go out. I'd see Milan cathedral if I dropped!"

"Then get your hats and coats, girls, and be ready in five minutes. The great pilgrimage is going to begin. We're off for our first wonder-walk in Italy!"



## CHAPTER XVII

### *In Quest of Culture*

The girls agreed afterwards that they were glad to have started their tour at Milan, because it was distinctly Italian enough to delight them, but not as enthralling as Florence or Rome or Venice, so it was well to keep the best till last. The great glory of the city was its white marble cathedral, one of the largest and most sumptuous in the world. Our party admired the facade and many treasures in the interior, then climbed up interminable steps to the top of the tower, whence there was a splendid view of the Alps. Through the watchman's telescope they could see Mont Blanc, Monte Rosa, the Great St. Bernard, and the St. Gothard. There were paths, protected by railings, on the roof of the cathedral, and they enjoyed rambling round and peeping down into the square or the streets below. One feature roused their utmost indignation. In defiance of many notices begging visitors not to deface the walls, the whole of the beautiful white marble up the sides of the staircase was covered with signatures in lead pencil, and tourists had even scribbled upon the lovely carved marble pinnacles of the roof and the bases of the statues of the saints. Most of them were in Italian, but other nationalities had followed

suit, and it was with shame that our pilgrims saw British names amongst them.

"Such desecration!" burst out Miss Penrose. "To leave one's autograph in a public place is nothing short of vandalism. People's own good taste ought to teach them that."

"Who wants to know that Robert Williams came here in 1913? I jolly well wish he'd stayed at home!" said Barbara.

"I'd like to get up a society for washing them all off," said Freda.

"People would do it again."

"I'd have a heavy penalty if they were caught. I'd put 'Milan Cathedral' on their foreheads with a rubber stamp and purple copying ink. Then they'd see what it felt like to be scribbled on. It would wear off in time, so they wouldn't be marked for life, but it would teach them a lesson."

"You'd better explain your views to the custodian."

"I shall have to wait till I've learnt to talk Italian."

The sight-seers were tired when they came down from the roof, but nobody would give in and return to the hotel, so they took a tram-car to the Porta Magenta, and stopped at the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie. In the adjoining disused monastery, on the refectory wall, was the wonderful world famous picture of "The Last Supper", by Leonardo da Vinci. The girls had seen reproductions of it, also a lantern-slide at their lectures on Italian art, and were most interested to look at the original, which despite its bad preservation and faded colors came well up to their

## Captain Peggie

expectations, for the emotions portrayed in the features of the apostles and the expression of heavenly resignation on the face of the Master far surpassed even the best copies.

"What a pity it's in such a deplorable state!" said Freda.

"Yes! It was painted in oils on the wall, before 1499, and the refectory has been used as a barracks. It's only lately that art lovers realized its existence and began to take care of it."

The following morning at Milan was spent in seeing the castle and the picture gallery, then the suit-cases were packed again and the party set off for that Mecca of tourists—Florence. By this time they were beginning to be seasoned travellers.

"We shall be licensed to put cockle shells in our hats soon, like middle-age pilgrims!" laughed Peggie. "I'm glad we haven't to tramp all the way to Rome with peas in our shoes."

"A rattling train's quite penance enough for me!" agreed Louise.

Yet the girls enjoyed the journey, and the many funny little incidents which happened *en route*. Three lively young Americans shared one of their compartments, and made amusing comments on the scenery. At a station the boy, a handsome fellow of about nineteen, purchased a picnic basket containing rolls, oranges and a little flask of native wine, and presented it to one of his companions, apparently as a peace offering after some quarrel, but she had not yet forgiven him, and refused his gift so curtly and emphatically that in a

sudden burst of temper he flung it out of the window and turned his back upon her. The Somerton party watched with amazement and regret as the attractive basket hurtled through the air and fell down an embankment.

"The silly baby!" whispered Peggie.

"I wish he'd offered it to us! I'd have liked an orange!" replied Louise.

The train was full, and at each station more and more people crowded into it. The American boy gave up his seat to a lady and stood in the corridor, but few of the Italians, in spite of the elaborate politeness of their manners, followed his example, and when a mother, carrying a heavy baby, entered the compartment, it was not one of her own countrymen, but a very tired-looking British clergyman who rose and offered her his place.

"Anglo-Saxons don't take off their hats with a sweeping bow on every occasion, but they've been taught 'ladies first'," commented Barbara, to whom the manners and customs of a country were as interesting as the scenery. "The way people push here is simply dreadful."

The girls had of course seen lantern slides of Florence and its art treasures, but no photography can reproduce a mediæval atmosphere and local color. The brown old city, with its ancient palaces and wonderful towers; the green glacier water of the Arno, flowing under its many bridges; the gardens with their flowering shrubs and dark cypress trees; the blue ridge of the Lucca mountains—all combined to make one of the



## Captain Peggie

most attractive beauty spots in Europe. Then there were the shops, an asset not usually catalogued in guide-books, but a source of supreme satisfaction to our pilgrims, who revelled in the rich display of post-cards, carved frames, local pottery with the crests of the Medici, reproductions of pictures, and an endless variety of charming cheap knickknacks of the neighborhood, just the very things to tempt schoolgirl purses, and to make nice little presents to take home to friends and relations. Miss Penrose and Miss Millar found it quite difficult to drag their flock past these fascinating shops, the best of which were on the Ponte Vecchio, where, as on London Bridge in old days, the houses lined the road across the river.

“Don’t spend all your money now, for you’ll want to buy something in Rome and Venice,” counselled Miss Penrose. “Each Italian town has its speciality, and you’ll like Roman mosaic brooches and Venetian beads. Leave some ‘lire’ for them or you’ll be sorry.”

“I’ll try and resist. But those Della Robbia babies on bright blue backgrounds are simply too lovely to be left behind,” said Peggie, who had several family birthdays in view, and knew the tastes of her mother and sister.

There was so very much to go and see in Florence—the Cathedral, and the famous Campanile built in colored marbles, which Louise unromantically compared to a slab of almond paste, a remark for which she was well snubbed by Miss Millar; the Baptistery where all children born in the city are baptized and where they were lucky enough to find a christening in pro-

gress; the picture galleries, where some of the most celebrated paintings of the old masters of Italian art are exhibited, and a variety of churches and museums. Perhaps what pleased them most was the Monastery of San Marco, a delightful peaceful spot, redolent of the Middle Ages and with memories of great souls who have passed away. Here Savonarola, the fifteenth century prophet and martyr, lived for a while. They saw his quaint cell, with his prayer desk and service book still preserved. And here, best of all, lived and worked the saintly Fra Angelico, whose pictures and frescoes decorated the walls, and whose angels, on their gold backgrounds, are unrivalled in their heavenly beauty, for the artist-monk painted them upon his knees.

Those of the party who had read *Romola* by George Eliot were, of course, well versed in the tragic story of Savonarola and wished they could have witnessed the festival of 23rd May, when the spot on which his stake was erected is annually strewn with flowers. The Via Bardi, where golden-haired Romola had lived with her student father, was also a point of pilgrimage, and Clara and May, being "Eliot" girls, took special photos of it to take back to their hostel. Then admirers of poetry had to go and see Casa Guidi, where Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning spent happy honeymoon years, and the little brown-eyed poetess had written "From Casa Guidi windows" looking from the shaded house into the sunlit Florentine street. There seemed no end to the celebrities, for the houses of Galileo, Dante, Michael Angelo and Benvenuto Cellini were still preserved, sombre places for the most part,

though ideas of comfort were different in their day. Specimens of the glorious and elaborate silver work of Cellini were on view in various museums to be marvelled at.

"I rather agree with the Pope," said Miss Penrose as she examined them. "The nobles told him that Cellini, who was a thorough scamp, richly deserved hanging. The Pope agreed his crimes merited the punishment. 'But,' he added, 'where would you get me another Cellini?' "

Some of the less artistic pilgrims tired a little of museums and galleries, where Louise declared she had counted forty Madonnas in one room.

"And as for Saint Sebastian, I'm sick of him!" she confessed. "I've seen at least thirty pictures of him, and in each one he seems to *like* the arrows sticking into him; he has a most pleasant expression as if he enjoyed them! I don't think those old masters had any imagination."

"Yet one must see them all," said Barbara. "I'm keeping a careful diary and putting down every celebrated picture, then I shall be able to talk about them when I get home."

"I'm going one better still!" said Freda. "I'm noting down a few very obscure and unimportant pictures, then when people begin to talk about the gems of the Florence galleries I shall say. "Ah! but did you notice that exquisite little Castagnola, No. 69, in the corner of the third room? In my opinion it's the best bit of painting of the fifteenth century. Castagnola is just being re-discovered and re-appreciated. He puts Filip-

po Lippi in the shade.' Of course nobody will have noticed the picture, but they'll all think I'm so clever—quite an art critic in fact."

"You humbug! Somebody'll find you out if you try it on," laughed Barbara.

Louise, who was largely an open-air girl, liked the beautiful Boboli gardens, with their marble fountains and goldfish, and exquisite view over the city, and she enjoyed excursions by tram-car to see interesting places in the neighborhood. She was perhaps hardly educated up to the standard of the art treasures, though the effort to appreciate them was extremely good for her, and just what her parents had desired.

"I've sent Dad and Mums home sixteen postcards already, and told them I'm wallowing in art and architecture, so I hope they'll be satisfied," she said to Peggie. "If you show me any more Madonnas and Saint Sebastians, stuck full of arrows like a hedgehog with its prickles out, I shall shut my eyes and refuse to look at them. Thank goodness to-morrow we go on to Rome."

Our party had spent Palm Sunday in Florence, but they were to celebrate Easter in the Eternal City. Naturally at such a season the place was crowded with pilgrims of all nations, and the hotels were filled to overflowing. Fortunately Miss Penrose had booked rooms well in advance, and her flock were in no danger of having to sleep in cabs or in museums, which was reputed to be the fate of some of the visitors, though possibly the newspapers exaggerated the extent of the influx. There was something very thrilling in feeling



themselves actually in Rome, which since its foundation in B.C. 753, has always seemed the very hub of the world. Down the long centuries British hostage, Saxon slave, or mediæval pilgrim had followed the road thither and gazed with wondering eyes upon the self-same stones and pillars, which, battered indeed by the Goths and Huns, still stood as monuments to the strength and glory of those who reared them. The "City of the Seven Hills" is such a mixture of ancient, mediæval, and modern that it keeps you in a perpetual state of surprise, for in the midst of shops and offices you come across a portion of a temple or a triumphal arch, and your hotel will probably stand back to back with a ducal palace. The grandeur of the place impressed the girls; to Louise at any rate it was easier to appreciate than Florence. She could understand ruins far better than pictures, and the magnificence of what was left appealed to her. She wandered delightedly round the Forum, climbing over broken columns, picking wild flowers, or catching locusts, inspected the rostra of Cæsar, peeped into the remains of temples, and listened quite attentively to Miss Penrose's careful explanations.

Of course our pilgrims went to St. Peter's, gorgeous for Eastertide, and marvelled at its size and its many wonders, and they looked at the statues in the Vatican Museum, and shuddered at the Mamertine Prison where St. Peter and St. Paul were confined, and walked round the vast Colosseum, where Christian martyrs had faced the lions, and saw many other sights such as are seen by the orthodox tourist. They were staying

close to the Pincian gardens, and in the evenings would walk along the broad terrace to watch the sunset over the city. Nowhere are there more beautiful sunsets than in Rome; clear pure shades of rose and violet flood the western sky, and the great dome of St. Peter's stands dark against a horizon of ruby and amethyst. The gardens were a perpetual source of interest, for earlier in the day they were frequented by charming little children with quaintly dressed nurses, and in the late afternoon they were the promenade of the Seminarists, students at the religious colleges, whose gowns were colored according to their countries, the Scottish in violet, the Hungarians in red, the Greeks in blue, and other nationalities in black with brilliant lappets and girdles. The red ones, irreverently called "the lobsters", excited the girls' admiration as they filed along, they were such a splendid spot of scarlet against the sombre green of the ilex and cypress trees.

Miss Penrose, who was a good cicerone, worked hard during the week spent in Rome, and conducted the band of pilgrims to every point of particular interest, though much had perforce to be left unvisited.

"There are three hundred and sixty-five churches in the city, so they would last for a year if we did one a day," said Peggie, after an ecclesiastical afternoon in St. Paolo fuori le Mura.

"Heavens! Take me back to school!" gasped Louise. "I like the churches all right, but I guess three hundred and sixty-five of them would give me spasms."

"You've got more to go and see at any rate," said

Peggie. "It's the catacombs of St. Agnes this afternoon."

"Oh bother!" (Louise was growing cross). "What do I care about St. Agnes? I don't know who she was! And what are catacombs, please? Anything to do with cats or combs?"

The girls were tidying their hair for lunch at the moment, and Louise waved her comb questioningly.

Peggie laughed.

"You are the limit! Catacombs are underground passages with little chapels, where the Christians used to meet in very early times when they were being persecuted. They were buried down there too."

"And have *we* to go down? Won't it be rather spooky?"

"I daresay it will, but very thrilling. I wouldn't miss it for worlds. Shall I tell you the story of St. Agnes? She was only a little girl, younger even than you are. I read it in a book we have at home."

"If it's interesting and not guide-booky!"

"You can stop me if you don't like it. Well, Agnes lived in Rome about 302 A.D. They were rich and great people, in a good position. The father and mother were Christians, but what you might call wobbly ones: they didn't want their Roman friends to know. Agnes was the most perfectly beautiful girl, with a quantity of glorious golden hair that fell below her knees. Symphronius, the son of the Roman prætor, fell desperately in love with her, and wished to marry her some day, but she refused him, because she knew he was not a Christian. He asked her again and again, and at

last he said: 'Agnes, is there anyone whom you love more than me?' Agnes replied: 'Yes,' and at first she would not say more, but when Symphronius pressed for the name she whispered 'Jesus Christ'. Then Symphronius went to his father and told him that Agnes was a Christian. Those were the days of the Emperor Diocletian, when all Christians were terribly persecuted, and went in danger of their lives. The prætor, who was what we should call a judge, ordered Agnes to be brought up before him. He scolded her for believing in Christianity, and said such views were not for maidens, but that as she was so young he would pardon her if she would give up this new religion at once, and be betrothed to his son. Agnes replied: 'I cannot give up Jesus Christ.'

" 'You are only a little girl of twelve,' said the prætor. 'You are too young to know anything about these matters. Sacrifice to the Gods and marry my son. It is your one chance of safety.'

" 'I know I am only a little girl,' answered Agnes, 'but I am old enough to love my Master, and I cannot deny Him!'

"Then the prætor said that Agnes was an obstinate Christian and he must condemn her to death. The soldiers brought in handcuffs, but her little white hands were so small they slipped through them and the chains fell on the floor. They took away her upper dress, but she shook down all her beautiful golden hair and it hung like a veil over her white under-robe. It is said that the very soldiers who led her to her execution wept with pity to see so exquisite a girl condemned to death.



Agnes herself was perfectly calm. When they reached the block she put her hair carefully aside, so that it should not dull the edge of the sword. The parents buried her in a catacomb outside the city, and the next night they each had a most wonderful dream. They dreamt they saw Agnes standing in a green meadow, dressed in white, and carrying a lamb in her arms. There was wonderful golden light all around her and she looked gloriously happy, happier than she had ever been on earth. That's why her emblem is a lamb. In the pictures of her she always has it with her."

"I like *her*!" said Louise reflectively. "Somehow she seems human. Yes, I should like to see *her* church and catacombs. When *you* tell me things, Pegs, I understand, but when Miss Penrose reads pages and pages out of the guide-book I'm bored stiff, and don't care to look at anything more."

So in the afternoon the pilgrims took a tram-car to the Basilica of St. Agnes. The martyrs of one age are the saints of the next, and the Emperor Constantine had built a church over the grave of the little girl whom the cruel law of the Emperor Diocletian had condemned to death. In the left aisle was a door leading to the catacombs, and under charge of the Sacristan our party descended a long flight of steps into a labyrinth of dark underground passages. They each carried a candle, and with these were able to see various monumental slabs and other relics of early Christianity, which were pointed out to them by the guide, who, by the by, amused them immensely with his English, which, gleaned from tourists, was of a slangy description.

When showing them any objects he would remark, with a strong Italian accent, "Oh, look 'ere! Oh, look 'ere! Is not this top-'ole?" a sentence that seemed to give him much satisfaction, but which sent the girls into fits.

"I expect the bits of Italian *we* fire off at them out of the conversation book are far worse," said Peggie. "But they're always *so* polite and never laugh at us. I felt a beast to giggle, but I don't think he heard us. That 'Oh, look 'ere!' began to get on my nerves. Only one more half day in Rome. Does anybody know what's the programme for to-morrow morning? In the afternoon we pack bags again and go on to Venice."

## CHAPTER XVIII

### *Venetian Waters*

The last few hours which our pilgrims had left of their short visit to Rome, were spent on the Palatine Hill. They saw the walls of Romulus, the spot where his hut had stood, "where two kings were content with a single hearth", and close by the angle of rock which was the traditional den of the she-wolf, the foster mother of Romulus and Remus. They passed the Altar to the Unknown God, and the Temple of Cybele, and went through the remains of the House of Livia and the Palace of Domitian. What interested them most was the Pædagogium, which in the first century of our era was the school for the imperial pages or for young slaves, on the walls of which the pupils had drawn and scribbled with the stylus (the ancient substitute for pen) all sorts of sketches, names, and sentences. One of the most famous of these is a rough picture of a donkey turning the wheel of a mill, with the inscription "Work little ass, as I have worked, and may it profit thee", probably the complaint of some youthful page upon the hardships of school life, for boy nature is the same whether in ancient Rome or at Eton.

The party was walking in the ruins of the palace of Septimus Severus when something quite unlooked for

and exciting happened. Two ladies passed them, talking to each other, and just as they had gone by, one of them looked back, spied Brenda, and flew to her with open arms.

"Auntie! My Auntie!" gasped Brenda, clinging round her neck and kissing her eagerly.

Here was a scene in the midst of the ruins. The lady overcome with emotion. Brenda crying like a baby, and Miss Penrose hurrying to the rescue.

"What's the matter?" asked Louise. "Met her aunt? Well, she's no need to howl about it, has she? Why are they arguing so? We shall be late for lunch if she doesn't come on!"

But that was just the point in question—Brenda would *not* come on. She seized her aunt firmly by the arm and refused to be separated from her.

"Don't send me away again! I don't want to go back to school!" she wailed tragically, regardless of Miss Penrose, who naturally claimed her pupil. The aunt, equally agitated, tried to soothe her, made a frantic appeal to be allowed to bear her away to her own hotel, but finding Miss Penrose adamant in the matter of parting with one of her pilgrims for even half an hour, she kissed her, and persuaded her to rejoin her own party.

The weeping, protesting Brenda, who was attracting undesirable notice among other sightseers in the ruins, was led away by Miss Millar, hustled into a taxi to hide her tears, and driven off in disgrace, while the others followed with Miss Penrose in a tram-car. Later on the girls discovered the cause of the trouble. Brenda, who was an orphan, had been brought up by



## Captain Peggie

the aunt, and they adored one another. Unfortunately her guardian, who under her father's will had full control over her, returned from India, and decided to remove her from the care of her aunt. He had sent her to Somerton College, and had arranged that her holidays should be passed abroad, or with friends of her father's.

"There have been fearful squabbles over me," Brenda confided to Peggie. "Mr. Farrant and Auntie Moira have never met one another, but they write long letters quarrelling about me. Auntie says she's Mother's sister, and she promised Mother to bring me up and she won't let me go if she can help it, and Mr. Farrant says he's my guardian and has the law on his side, and he can send me to any school which he likes. It's horrid to be quarrelled over. I wish I could go home with Auntie! I was miserable when I first went to Cavell, and it's brought it all back now I've seen her again. What am I to do?"

"You can't do anything!" advised Peggie. "Miss Penrose has brought you out here, and she can't let your aunt whisk you off goodness knows where! You're in *her* charge. Do dry your eyes! You're not so miserable as that surely? We're going to Venice this afternoon."

"It's all very well for you to talk!" sobbed Brenda. "Nobody's dragged *you* away from the home where you were brought up."

It was really most unfortunate. Brenda was thoroughly upset by the meeting, and wept at intervals during the journey to Venice. She waxed more cheerful

after a night's rest, however, and consented to enjoy herself. In the midst of such a jolly party and in such magic surroundings it was difficult to keep on crying, especially as it was not Somerton etiquette to "wear the willow". The girls had enjoyed Milan, and Florence, and Rome, but they declared the best had been left till last when they saw Venice. To stay in a hotel which had been a mediæval palace, and to gaze at canals instead of paved streets seemed like living on an enchanted isle. If Rome is justly called "The Eternal City", Venice is equally well named "The Queen of the Adriatic", with her glorious old buildings and many waterways. Of course the first thing the pilgrims wanted to do was to go out in gondolas; the day was warm, and after their exhausting fortnight of hard sightseeing it was bliss to be rowed about on the Grand Canal, where the green water lapped the very walls of the ancient palaces, and the medley of rich colors under the blue sky was a thing to remember. The Rialto bridge, with its associations of Antonio and Shylock, was a point of special interest, also the Palazzo Rezzonico, where Robert Browning, the poet, lived for many years after he left Florence, and by the greatest good fortune they were witnesses of a Venetian wedding, the prettiest possible affair, where bride, bridegroom and guests arrived in gaily decorated gondolas, and got out at the broad marble flight of steps leading to the church of Santa Maria della Salute.

"We've seen a christening at Florence and a wedding here. We ought to see an Italian funeral and then we'd be satisfied," declared Barbara.

## Captain Peggie

"I happened to see a most impressive funeral once at Siena," said Miss Penrose. "It was one of the 'brethren of the Misericordia'. He was buried at sunset, and the companions of his order, dressed in black robes and hoods which hid their faces all but the eyes, followed the bier with lighted torches. As they passed through the old streets of Siena I felt as if I were transported centuries back, and were living in the Middle Ages."

"I hope we shan't see any funerals. Miss Penrose is welcome to them!" whispered Louise to Peggie. "A wedding is more in my line."

There were many jokes as they went along. Most of them had heard the story of the girl tourist who was so struck with the beauties of Venice that she wrote home:

"Dear Mother—I am sitting at the edge of the Grand Canal, drinking it all in!"

but everybody wanted to tell the tale to everybody else, till it was voted a chestnut, and utterly taboo. Some of the girls had seen Gilbert and Sullivan's opera *The Gondoliers*, and kept recalling scenes and singing snatches of songs; and others, who were fond of Shakespeare, tried to imagine the scene as it must have looked when Bassanio and Gratiano and Lorenzo and Jessica lent romance to the city. Most of them had brought cameras and took many snapshots, and a few of the more artistic souls tried rapid pencil sketches, but these were difficult when the gondolas were perpetually moving.

They had chartered their vessels for an hour, and

when this had elapsed they disembarked at the steps by the Palace of the Doge, and went into the great square, as Miss Penrose said, "to see the Church of San Marco", and as Louise said, "to see the pigeons". The latter were one of the sights of Venice which the girls had keenly anticipated, and they gained first innings. Large flocks of them lived on the roofs of the public buildings, and under the arches of St. Mark's, and by old established custom were fed by the visitors. Loungers in the square sold peas and Indian corn, and the girls, having bought several packets, stretched out their hands full of tempting morsels. The pigeons, petted by the public, were absolutely tame, and to the immense delight of our pilgrims flew fearlessly down and perched on their arms, shoulders, and even on their hats, so eager were they not to miss their portion. The lovely creatures, fluttering against the deep blue of the sky, made an exquisite picture, and cameras were busily employed, every girl taking a photo of her friend, as each naturally wished to have a record of herself engaged in feeding the famous pigeons. Louise, who liked the feel of their little cold feet on her hand, bought Indian corn in extravagant fashion, and could hardly be persuaded to leave such a congenial occupation and go into San Marco. When she went, however, she was glad. She had not raved over many of the foreign churches, but this gorgeous vision of Byzantine art enthralled her. The oriental style with its marble columns, its lustrous gold, its mosaics, and its profuse decoration seemed in keeping with the eastern character of the city, and to express, as nothing else could do,



## Captain Peggie

the ancient spirit of Venice, the Queen of the Waters. The pomp and splendor, the jewels and enamels, the translucent alabaster, the treasures in rock-crystal, agate and turquoise suggested the glories of Solomon's temple, and were worth a visit from the land of Sheba, much less from England. Our own stately gray cathedrals at home seem to suit our soil and our climate and our mode of worship, but this was a glowing gem of the Orient, built beneath blazing blue skies by a people to whom color was the greatest essential of art.

There were so many delightful things to be done in Venice. As Miss Penrose had prophesied, the girls fell in love with the wonderful beads of native manufacture. They were sold in strings of every variety of color, and the supreme occupation was to mix and re-thread them according to personal taste. Each of the party prepared several necklaces to take home as presents, and made very skilful combinations of big and little beads, in beautiful harmonies or contrasts of pinks and blues and greens and ambers.

They went by steamer among the islands of the lagoons and visited the Lido, the seaside resort of Venice, where rows of small wattle or reed bathing-huts decorated the beach, and where picturesque old sailors sold marvellous shells and little sea horses which they had caught in the Adriatic. Then they took gondolas to Murano, the island where the exquisite Venetian glass is manufactured, and stood by and watched while a small vase was made for each of them inside the works. It was curious to see the hot glass, soft as toffee, being twisted and molded into beautiful



UNDER THE ARCHES OF ST. MARK'S



shapes, and most interesting to think that they had followed the evolution of their vases from the very beginning. The only objection to the ornaments was their frailty, but each was well packed in dried sea-grass to preserve it. The girls had collected so many pretty trifles to take home that their suit-cases had overflowed, and they were obliged to buy native baskets in which to put their treasures. Fortunately for their pockets most of their purchases were quite inexpensive, and owing to the rate of foreign exchange of money, a shilling went very much further in Italy than it did in England. At street stalls and with many of the hawkers who carried their wares on trays, the old system of bargaining still obtained, the vendor being generally prepared to accept about half of what he asked, a tiresome custom which involved much waste of time, and a sense of uncertainty as to whether thy had beaten down the price to starvation point, or had themselves been hopelessly swindled. It was at any rate good practice for their elementary acquaintance with the Italian tongue, and the sentences they had learnt out of the conversation book came in very useful.

Of the many excitements of Venice the most wonderful experience of all was the illumination of the Grand Canal at night. Numbers of barges, covered with colored lights, brought bands of musicians with mandolines and guitars, whose songs and choruses, and the strum of the accompanying instruments, sounded charming across the water. Hotels and palaces and private houses hung Japanese lanterns in their windows, and though the moonlight was wanting, the scene



resembled fairyland. 'As a very special treat our pilgrims were allowed one evening to embark in gondolas and were rowed up and down the canal close to the festive barges, a rather expensive propinquity, however, for a gaily attired musician would jump lightly and gracefully into any gondola which approached sufficiently near, and would rattle a collecting box suggestively, while the gondoliers, no doubt bribed beforehand, gave every opportunity for the picturesque bandits to levy toll on the good-natured tourists. Some fireworks, set off at the Grand Hotel, added a finishing touch to the delightful scene, and the flare of colored lights and the glimmer of falling green stars were reflected in the water below till they seemed to be floating on a surface of sparkling radiance.

The glamour and the brilliance of it all excited Louise to the pitch of what might have been a fatal adventure. She had watched several scarlet-sashed agile figures leap easily overboard from the barges, and when her own gondola happened to come side by side with that containing Brenda and Barbara she was fired to emulate them, and jumping up in her seat would have attempted to transfer her quarters had not Peggie seized her firmly round the waist and dragged her back.

"Louise! what are you doing? Are you mad?" cried several agitated voices. The gondoliers shouted and gesticulated, and Miss Millar, who was escorting their portion of the party, called out threats to take her back immediately unless she kept to her place in quiet.

"You idiot! you'd have been in the canal in half a second!" chided Peggie. "You said you didn't want to

see a Venetian funeral, but *we* should have seen one, if you'd tried such a stupid trick! Don't you know you ought to sit still in a boat?"

"Those men hop about quite easily!"

"Oh, I daresay! They're used to it! But we don't want you to upset the gondola, thanks! We'd rather be *on* the Grand Canal than *in* it!"

There seemed to be no end to the enchantments of fascinating Venice; there were glorious blood-red sunsets, when the colored sails of the fishing-boats glowed crimson as the far off sky; there were pearly, opal-hued mornings, when the sun shone in silver ripples on the lagoons, and blue noontides, when the deep shadows of the arcades were a grateful shelter from the white blazing glare of the piazza. There were many amusing local scenes to watch, sometimes a woman from a top window would let down a basket by a cord into a vegetable barge, drawn up in the canal below, and would haul back salad and onions and lettuces, an easy way of marketing which attracted the girls' cameras, though it was difficult to get a good snap-shot. Walking through Venice was a quaint experience. The streets, so called, consisted of a maze of narrow alleys running at the backs of houses the fronts of which faced the canals. Yet there was the native life of the place, lace-makers seated at their doors, girls carrying great brass water pots from the public fountains, vegetable and orange vendors selling their wares under large green umbrellas, and once our party had the good fortune to spy, what is growing rare in Italy now, a bound-up *bambino*, that is to say a baby with its little

body and legs swathed so tightly in bandages that it resembles a cocoon, an old mediæval fashion, intended to produce straight limbs, but which is happily passing away in these more enlightened days of culture. The *bambino* was the most charming and picturesque little object, with big dark eyes, and a lace cap, and fat pink hands grasping a very modern looking teething ring. As it was in the arms of a smiling elder sister, who seemed ready to make friends with a band of English girls, some of our pilgrims begged the privilege of holding it, and the small good-tempered morsel of humanity was passed from one to another of an eager row of would-be nurses until he finally rebelled and howled.

"Bless him! Isn't he a beauty? Just like those Della Robbia pictures on blue backgrounds that we bought at Florence!" purred Peggie, kissing the smooth brown cheek rapturously.

"He's so stiff with bandages, poor darling, it feels like nursing the poker!" declared Louise.

"Do they ever take them off?" asked Barbara.

"Oh I hope so! Surely at night!"

"British babies wouldn't put up with it, but I suppose he's used to it and doesn't mind. I expect they hang him up on a nail on the wall when they want him out of the way. I hope his legs will be extra straight when he grows up. They ought to be after that!"

"On the contrary," said Miss Penrose, "there are more cripples in Italy than in England, and the habit of binding the babies in this fashion may be responsible for some of them. Nature meant the little limbs to kick about, and not to be tied up like mummies."

"I'm glad I've nursed him anyway! Lulu, you took a snap-shot of me? Good! That'll be a piece of 'local color' to show my friends when I go home, won't it?"

It was hard to say good-bye to bewitching, enchanting Venice, but the holiday was growing short, and our pilgrims were obliged to set their faces towards home again. They broke the journey at Verona, partly to avoid spending the night in the train, and partly to see the historic haunts of Romeo and Juliet. The old town was fascinating in the extreme, a mixture of Roman and mediæval. They saw the magnificent amphitheatre, in wonderful preservation, and the ancient forum, which is still the fruit and vegetable market, and is one of the most picturesque squares in Italy. Everything in Verona seemed connected with romance; outside the cathedral were bas-reliefs of Roland and Oliver, the two great champions of Charlemagne, roughly carved as long ago as 1135, and at the castle by the river, so the legend runs, beautiful golden-haired Rosamund, daughter of the conquered ruler of Verona, and married against her will to Alboin, King of the Lombards, was forced by her barbarian husband to drink wine out of her own father's skull, an insult which the shuddering Queen dared not disobey, but repaid afterwards with a terrible revenge.

Shakespeare's play of Romeo and Juliet was founded on events which actually occurred in Verona, and there were various places in the city pointed out as having belonged to Montagu or Capulet. On the whole these were most disappointing. The old house, said to be that of Juliet's parents, overhung the street, and was



quite destitute of the balcony and garden immortalized in the famous love scene, while Juliet's tomb was an empty mediæval sarcophagus in a suppressed Franciscan chapel inside a garden. The girls expecting to find some glorious monument, were taken by a caretaker into a neglected building where stood the huge marble coffin. There was no lovely Juliet inside, yet it was not empty. To the disgust of our pilgrims it was full to the brim with visiting-cards, left by tourists in memory of having paid their respects to the spot. The piles of old, dusty cards gave an indescribably sordid and unattractive appearance to the scene.

"How *can* people do it? It's as bad as scribbling your name on Milan Cathedral!" exclaimed Barbara indignantly.

"Take me away. It upsets my ideas about Juliet. I'd rather see it all on the stage," said Peggie, who had once witnessed a performance of the romantic play with full accessories of limelight and scenery, and was not prepared for prosaic realities.

Verona was the last stopping-place of their tour in Italy, and next morning they set out for the railway station, and resigned themselves to a long day and night's journey in the train. Paris, with beds, was a welcome rest, and they had time for a very hurried peep at the fashionable city before they were obliged to catch the express to Dieppe. Fortunately for Miss Millar, Barbara, Peggie and other sufferers from *mal de mer*, the sea was calm, they performed the crossing in comparative comfort, and were able to stand on deck

and wave a welcome to the shores of Albion as the vessel steamed into harbor.

“It’s been glorious! Simply glorious!” said Peggie, summing up her impressions of the tour. “I’ve enjoyed every single minute of it. I didn’t know there was so much to see in the world. I believe I feel years older! Quite a travelled lady in fact. I *do* hope our snap-shots will come out well! We must have an exhibition of them all, and of our postcards, I expect the school will like to see them. My diary is going home to Mother. Lulu, I’m writing a special letter to Uncle and Auntie. I’ll try to tell them what we’ve seen, and I want to say thank you to them for just the most splendiferous treat of my life. They were absolutely dears to send *me* as well as *you*!”

## CHAPTER XIX

### *The Wet Saturday Club*

The summer term had come, and according to the custom of the college, as much time as possible was spent by the girls out of doors. Their school gardens, which they had prepared in the spring, began to show the reward of early work, and those who had entered for the July Flower Show were busy weeding, watering, tending their plants, and demolishing slugs. Many of the girls had brought back bicycles after Easter, and cycle excursions were organized on Saturdays to various points of interest in the neighborhood. Cricket took the place of hockey for the daily games hour from 12 to 1 o'clock, and there were matches on certain afternoons. The long light evenings gave time for tennis after preparation, and some enthusiasts even got in a set before breakfast.

It was Peggie's last season of office at Brontë. Next September she would have passed from the Middle School, and would be a senior at Austen, where her name was already entered. She was almost feverishly anxious to make a success of this final term, and to leave the credit of her house higher than she had found it. She worked her best in school, though being more of a "plodder" than a "star pupil" she had little chance for

honors against several clever girls in Nightingale and Cavell, or even against Maggie Fowler, whose totals were generally above her own. Being captain gave her many interests, but rather took up her time. It was often necessary to act umpire at the tennis court and train others instead of playing herself, and her own garden suffered while she bestowed advice on younger girls who came to ask for her help in the growing of their prize blossoms. It was all for the good of Brontë, but it did not give her the opportunity she craved of doing some special thing to win a "distinction" for the house.

"I haven't been much of a champion so far," she thought sadly. "I don't carry all the school honors off like Barbara. I'm afraid my name won't be written in gold letters as captain."

Yet Peggie was most tremendously in request at her hostel. She was ever ready to listen, and the girls had begun to gravitate to her like needles to a magnet, certain of sympathy and real practical help in any difficulty. She always seemed to take people by the right handle and, without any preaching, to get the best out of them. Her own standards were very high, and during her two terms of office, almost unconsciously the tone of the house had risen, and certain little meannesses and lapses from truth and honor which were current before had happily ceased.

"Peggie's such a dear!" said Louise once. "She helped me to develop my photos before she touched her own. She said, of course, a captain ought to. But I don't know—some captains would just grab every-



## Captain Peggie

thing as their right. I suppose it's entirely as you look at it. When I first came I thought it must be glorious to be the head of the house, and be able to order everybody about, but now I think it's a jolly hard job if you do it as Pegs does. I shouldn't like to be bothered with folks continually coming and wanting me the whole day long."

If Peggie had not won challenge cups or other laurels for Brontë, she at least had the honor of instituting the Wet Saturday Afternoon Club. It was her own idea entirely. The weather during May had been most disappointing, and matches and tournaments had been regretfully abandoned.

"What we want is this," said Captain Peggie, explaining her project in the boarders' sitting-room, "we ought to have a club for rainy days. Don't laugh! I don't mean a collecting-box to encourage thrift, or a Burial Society. What I *do* mean is this—when it's wet we all grouse about and stare out of the window and wonder what we shall do. And everybody is so down in the dumps that nobody can think of anything, and we just go on staring at the weather till we feel blue-moldy. Well—yes, I'm coming to the point, don't hurry me—I propose that we start a club, and that certain members must arrange to have certain things all prepared to amuse us, perfectly ready, so that they can turn on the entertainment tap in a minute, and give us a good time."

"Rather a brainy notion!" approved Helen. "I suppose you mean have a competition of some sort?"

"Certainly, and be able to produce it with cards written out beforehand, or whatever was wanted for it handy, so that we don't waste half the afternoon hunting about for things."

"We might have a small subscription for a prize fund."

"Rather! And someone could recite or make up a story, or show card tricks. So long as each member has a stunt she can bring forward we'll manage to have some fun out of it. Now then, who'll join? Names, please!"

Everybody joined, even those girls who protested that they would be quite unable to make suggestions, and begged that their names might be put last on the list of proposed entertainers, in the hope that they might never be called upon.

"Can't put the whole bunch of you last!" said Peggie. "Some of you'll have to sparkle, so make up your minds to it. Six will be enough for the first what d'you call it—symposium—conversazione, anything you like! I propose Connie, Dorothy, Helen, Maggie, Enid, and Mary."

"Leave me out of it and put down yourself, please!" said Mary promptly. "You know I've no parlor tricks!"

"Yes, Peggie, you *must* be on the first entertainment committee!" agreed the others.

"Very well then, we six are going to be prepared to give a special emergency performance any time it's required."

"And we're prepared to act audience, so there we are!"

## Captain Peggie

Of course the next two Saturdays were fine: the mere fact of instituting such a society was enough to make the weather clear up, like taking your umbrella when you've a new hat on, or putting up a tent for a garden-party. But on the Saturday after that came an afternoon of hopeless wet, when the grass was soppy and sodden, and the roads muddy, and even "mackintosh rambles" were impossible. Twenty-five girls, bitterly disappointed that cricket and tennis were off, stared out forlornly at the pelting rain, till somebody suddenly suggested the Club.

"Here you six stars! When are you going to begin and twinkle?" demanded Joyce.

"Don't alarm yourselves, we're quite ready for you! Seats unreserved, so you must scramble for them! Don't break the furniture, please! Gently! Do you want Miss Sheppard coming in to ask if we're having a Parliamentary election?"

It took a little while to get the audience suitably seated. The girls were in a frolicsome mood, and could not resist some mild ragging.

"Sit next to me, Violet!"

"Sorry, but I'm grafted on to Joan!"

"Oh well! If other lips have loved you *I* don't care!"

"I can't see for your big head, Kathleen. I wish you'd cut it off!"

"Take me on your lap! I'm only a little one!"

"May we sit on the table?"

"Programmes penny each!"

It was at this juncture that Louise, who had hastily disappeared, came back bearing a large tin of toffee. She held it aloft triumphantly.

"It was sent me yesterday. So I put it by for a rainy day. I'm a fine example of thrift, and 'Go to the ant, thou sluggard' and all the rest of it. I'm just oozing with righteousness. I didn't say you were to have any, though? Shan't I be a socialist if I share round what I've saved? Don't throw things at me—you'll break my halo! Remember I'm Saint Louise! You may hand round the box if you like. Isn't that saintly of me? I'm getting too good to live. Nothing remains for me now but to write my memoirs and pop off. Send me a wreath when I'm gone, won't you?"

Blissfully sucking big pieces of home-made toffee, the audience, almost speechless for the present, waited to be entertained.

"The first item," announced Peggie, "is an original story by Miss Maggie Fowler, the talented authoress of our Christmas play 'Smart Relations'. It's entitled 'Mixed Morals'."

"Sounds very improving!" gulped Joyce.

"Is it going to be a shot at me?" Violet managed to ask.

"It's not a shot at anybody! Be quiet, and let Maggie begin."

Maggie, rather shy, but beaming through her spectacles, was waiting for her innings. Before anybody else had time to interrupt she commenced to read aloud her story.



## MIXED MORALS

Once upon a time there lived two sisters, and their names were Cynthia and Inez. Cynthia was very, very fair and very, very beautiful and very, very good. She was a story-book girl, so you see because her hair was flaxen and her eyes were blue she just had to be an angel—she couldn't help it. Fair heroines are always saints. Inez, on the contrary, had flashing black eyes and raven hair. She was beautiful in the way that witches are beautiful, but she was very, very bad. Dark heroines are always bad, so Inez couldn't help being a sinner any more than Cynthia could help being a saint. The sisters were twins, but how they happened to be so unlike, nobody knew. Most twins are the same to their very hair ribbons, and when they exchange those they are able to have great fun at school because the mistresses can't tell which is which. There could be no amusement of this kind for poor little Cynthia and Inez; each had to "dree her ain weird" and live up to what the story-books expected from her. It got rather monotonous at their happy home to be always praising Cynthia and always scolding Inez, so one day their father said to their mother:

"My dear, if we don't take care we shall lose both our children. I felt Cynthia's shoulders this morning, and find she is sprouting wings, and if we allow these to grow she will very soon fly away and leave us. On the other hand, I removed a portion of Inez's raven hair from her brow, and found what are suspiciously like the beginnings of horns! This will not do at all."

"We must take steps at once about it," agreed the mother.

So they first went to a doctor, and he looked through all his medical books but said he couldn't find any operation for removing wings or horns, and referred them to the hospital, and the hospital hadn't any beds vacant, and in the meantime Cynthia's wings were coming on so fast they were beginning to sprout feathers.

"Something *must* be done!" said her father.

Then they went to a wise woman, who had a little office in town and gave advice to worried parents, and they asked her how they could prevent Cynthia being so very, very good and Inez being so very, very bad. The wise woman nodded her head and thought out the problem, then at last she said:

"Try the influence of environment. Mix their complexions and you will mix their morals."

She wrote out her prescription on a piece of paper, and they took it home and pondered over it. After a while the father thought he understood, and he told the mother what the wise woman meant. The idea rather staggered her at first, but afterwards she agreed with its wisdom: they determined to *change their children's complexions!* First they took Cynthia and stained her face slightly with walnut juice, and dyed her flaxen hair black as ebony. She didn't look angelic any longer, and when you don't look an angel it isn't worth while behaving as one. Then they took Inez, and they bleached her raven hair with soda and dyed it a lovely golden shade, and they powdered and rouged her face till there was nothing left dark about her but her eyes, and eyes can't flash out of a fair face; at least they never do in story-books. They gave them each a new name too; they called Cynthia Betty, and they called Inez Priscilla. The result was marvellous. In less than a fortnight Betty's wings, feathers and all, had disappeared back inside her shoulders, and as for Priscilla her horns vanished at the first touch of her golden hair. There was still enough good in Betty to prevent her growing as bad as Inez had been, and Priscilla's dark eyes debarred her from sainthood, so their parents decided that their morals were now thoroughly well mixed, and they sent a check to the wise woman with a grateful letter of thanks and permission to use their names as a testimonial when other fathers and mothers, in difficulties over their children, should apply for advice at the little office in town.

## Captain Peggie

When the girls had laughed over Maggie's rather whimsical story, it was Helen's turn to act entertainer. She recited "The Highwayman" by Alfred Noyes, in very spirited style, though as one or two of the others had also learnt it in the elocution class it was a trifle stale to part of the audience. They clapped magnanimously however, as it would hardly have been school etiquette to do otherwise.

Peggie, who came next on the programme, had prepared a competition. She produced twenty-four clothes-peg, together with a large number of sheets of colored tissue paper.

"What you've got to do," she announced, "is to dress the clothes-pegs up like dolls in fancy costumes. You can draw faces on the knobs, and you must cut the costumes from the tissue paper. You may all scoot to fetch scissors and needles and thread, but don't be long about it. I give you five minutes, then I shall say 'Begin!' No, I'm not going to compete myself. It wouldn't seem fair when this is my show. I shall act time-keeper. You'll be allowed twenty minutes, then we'll have the manikin parade."

There was an exodus for work-baskets, then twenty-four pairs of hands began to be very busy with tissue paper and scissors, cutting out and contriving and fitting on. Some girls retired to corners to work in private, others formed groups and compared notes, laughing over their efforts. When Peggie called "Time!" there was a general howl of anguish, and an agonized appeal for just a few minutes more.

"Hurry up then! We can't wait all afternoon!

You're rather a set of slow-coaches, aren't you? You might be dressing giants instead of clothes-pegs!"

At last all the quaint little dolls were finished, and were placed, twenty-four of them, in a row along the table, with a number attached to each. Some of them were really very cleverly managed. There was a hospital nurse, in cap and apron; a lady in a crinoline, with a wreath of flowers on her head; a baby in long white robe; an Arab; Red Riding Hood; an Irish colleen; a sailor; a Turkish lady with a veil, and many others. It was quite surprising how much it was possible to make out of the materials provided.

"The vote will be by ballot," said Captain Peggie, cutting paper into twenty-five strips. "You must simply write the number of the one you think the best, fold your slip and hand it in, and I'll shuffle them and count."

Nothing could have seemed fairer. Everyone took a pencil, and complied with the regulations. The slips were shuffled and the counting began. The voting was unanimously in favor of the lady with the crinoline, whose elaborate get-up surpassed all the other attempts.

"Nineteen — twenty — twenty-one — twenty-two — twenty-three — twenty-four — *twenty-five* — Why, the early Victorian lady has got all the votes! Betty, I congratulate you!" said Peggie. "You've simply had a walk over!"

"Are there twenty-five votes for No. 17?" asked Helen. "You're quite sure?"

"Help me to count them again!"

Helen did so, meanwhile whispering something which brought a shade across the captain's face.



## Captain Peggie

"I hadn't thought of that. I must inquire into it," she replied. Then turning to the girls she said: "There were twenty-four competitors and I also had a vote. Now if twenty-five votes are recorded for the same doll, that means that the winning competitor must have voted for her own entry."

Everybody turned and looked at Betty, who blushed scarlet.

"I didn't know it was forbidden!" she murmured.

"It's very unsporting, and quite against school etiquette! I should have thought you'd have know that!"

"I'll vote for Red Riding Hood then!"

"It won't make any difference to the prize though, will it?" sniffed Kathleen scornfully.

"I don't want any prize, thanks! I'd rather not have it," said Betty. "Keep it for another competition."

As an electric wave of indignation was circulating round the room, Captain Peggie judged it wise to agree and to withhold the prize. To restore the atmosphere, she suggested the next item on the programme, a duet on two combs by Connie and Enid, who gave a rather ear-splitting performance of popular airs, and would have gone on for ever if the audience had not risen in rebellion and confiscated the instruments.

"You've had your turns and it's *mine* now! I don't mean to be crowded out!" declared Dorothy.

"All right! Twinkle, twinkle, little star! Go on and shine, by all manner of means! Your humble slaves are ready to hang upon your words."

Dorothy, not to be outdone by Maggie in literary

composition, had also written a story, and was terribly afraid that there might not be time left to listen to it. She began therefore at once, and read very fast.

## HOW THEY CURED DORIS

When Mr. and Mrs. Bannerman went away for a week's holiday by themselves at Brighton, they left Doris in charge of the rest of the children. It was partly because she was the eldest, and partly because they could trust her to keep the family up to the mark.

"Make Godfrey get up in the morning, and see that Phillis does her practising, and be sure you all learn your holiday tasks!" said Mrs. Bannerman, before she left, and Doris had promised "I will".

She kept her word too. Precisely at 7:30 she entered her brothers' bedroom armed with a wet sponge, and routed them out of bed with terrible energy. She sat over Phillis while that unwilling damsel played her scales; she hunted out the history book from which Bert and Bunty must learn their holiday tasks; she doled out the jam at tea-time, and performed other unwelcomed duties with what her brothers and sisters considered quite unnecessary zeal. She was so virtuous over it and waxed so aggressively moral that they held a secret indignation meeting when her back was safely turned.

"I vote we don't do a single thing she says," sulked Godfrey.

"Then she'll tell Mother," said Bert.

"She says she promised Mother to make us work," put in Bunty. "I shan't work for *her*."

"I'm not going to be ordered about by Doris," said Godfrey.

"You sillies, you're on the wrong tack altogether," said Phillis. "Don't you see Dorrie's enjoying herself? She likes superintending our work—very well then, let's keep her busy, and perhaps she'll get tired of it. Listen and I'll tell you what to do."

So the younger ones put their heads together and organized a campaign for outdoing Doris in goodness. Next morning they were up early, and at the breakfast-table before she was, and spoke virtuously against being late. They all learnt holiday tasks and insisted that she must hear them, they hunted up pieces of sewing or any kind of work which required assistance, and took them to her for advice and help. Phillis made her practice duets, and asked her to play the accompaniments to songs. As fast as one had finished with her another would demand her attention; they begged her to read aloud or to teach them pieces of poetry. Doris, flattered at first, found she had not a single moment to herself, and began to tire of this sudden burst of virtue on the part of the family.

"Look here! I'm not a holiday governess," she remonstrated at last.

"Aren't you? I thought that was your job. Then if you're not, for goodness' sake let us alone," answered Phillis. "We won't worry you if you won't worry us."

It was rather a climb down for Doris, but as the holiday tasks were all learnt by now she considered it safe to relax discipline for the last couple of days, during which time the family let off steam. When Mr. and Mrs. Bannerman returned from their holiday at Brighton they found five model children waiting to welcome them.

"I was afraid the younger ones might give trouble, because dear Doris is apt to be just a little dictatorial at times. Her manner seems much improved," said Mrs. Bannerman to her husband.

"Not nearly so domineering," agreed Mr. Bannerman. "I suppose the sense of responsibility has worked the change."

But the young folks kept their secret, and neither Father nor Mother got to know how they had cured Doris.

The girls clapped as Dorothy, quite breathless with reading fast, came to the end of her "moral story". After all, she need not have hurried so much, for there

was a little time left before tea, and as several members of the audience began pulling manuscripts from their pockets, and coughing suggestively, as if to intimate that they could contribute to the entertainment if asked, Peggie took the hint and invited the outsiders to give their "turns". Joyce stood up at once, palpably pleased.

"I brought a little thing of my own, just in case you might run short," she explained. "Of course I'll read it if you really want it. Shall I?"

"Go on!" encouraged the audience. So she began.

## A NOVEL GONE WRONG

Miranda Gwendolen Montgomery lay on a magnificent couch in the marquee at her father's ancestral home. Within her reach lay a grand piano, a gramophone, a magnificent St. Bernard dog, a priceleess violin, a Persian kitten, a dozen boxes of chocolates, a typewriter, a new bicycle, and a few other articles which she might happen to want. A beautiful girl was Miranda Gwendolen, with her lily-white cheeks, her raven eyes, her cherry lips, and her adorable little pink nose. She never had anything else to do but to lie on the couch in the marquee of her father's ancestral home—or if she had she didn't do it, because she was found there in every chapter. As for Lord Algernon Ponsonby de Vernon, he was the image of a Greek statue—a rather awkward thing to resemble because it generally has an arm off and often lacks its nose. His hair was a shade more golden than the gold braid of his uniform, his eyes flashed fire so constantly that he could light his cigarettes at them, and when he tossed his head, as frequently happened, he was always able to catch it again immediately without accidents. He strode into the marquee as usual one day, and after turning on his heel, a manœuvre he was fond of executing, he threw himself on one knee before his lady love.



## Captain Peggie

"Most devotedly adored one!" he exclaimed in luscious, gurgling accents. "Through countless centuries of transmigrations I have loved you and lost you. In this incarnation at least let us be happy. My yacht awaits us. We will fly to Gretna Green on the wings of the wind!"

Miranda Gwendolen dropped the grand piano, and the priceless violin, and the St. Bernard dog, and the other trifles which were amusing her, and threw her long ivory fingers over her swan-like face. She was a born coquette.

"This is so sudden," she murmured, but she got up from the couch for fear he might change his mind, and rang the bell for her suit-case. She had always been prepared for an elopement.

So they started on the yacht for Gretna Green, and her noble father pursued them in a battleship, but alack! before they reached the shore of Bonnie Scotland the tempest lowered o'er them and they disappeared in a waterspout. They were never heard of more, and their empty graves lie open on the lone hillside.

Joyce was only just in time to finish her effusion for the first bell now rang for tea, and the girls were obliged to scatter and wash their hands, having amused themselves quite tolerably for a wet afternoon.

"It's clearing a little," announced Peggie, looking anxiously through the window. "We may get a ten minutes' run before we go to Folk Dancing. Saturday isn't quite Saturday unless we're out somewhere."

"But the club's a great deal better than just mooning about the house. I vote we keep it up, and have another programme ready for next wet day," said Dorothy.

## CHAPTER XX

### *The School Makes Hay*

There were so many delightful things to do during the summer term that the difficulty was to find enough spare time to give to them all. A certain section of the school was artistic, and camp stools and easels were set up in various beauty spots of the grounds. Helen, since her study sheet had won a distinction for Brontë, had taken keenly to sketching, and Peggie also was enjoying the possession of an oil paint box and palette, fired by the remembrance of the pictures she had seen in Florence.

"Of course I can't ever paint like the old masters," she said, "but even Raphael had to begin to learn some time. I'd rather work in oils than water-colors."

"We shall have you painting a study of St. Sebastian stuck full of arrows, I suppose!" said Louise. "He seemed the favorite subject at most of the galleries we saw."

"If you'll stand as model!"

"No thanks!"

Among the girls who had shared the delightful "culture trip" to Italy there was now a special bond of union, and though they might belong to different houses they often met and exchanged chats on past experiences.

This was particularly the case with Peggie, Louise, and Brenda. The three had generally shared a bedroom together while abroad, and the cousins had grown very friendly with Brenda. Once her shyness was conquered she was a pleasant girl, and the fact that she was an orphan, and a subject of dispute between her guardian and her aunt, invested her with rather an element of romance, and gave her almost the interest of the heroine of a novel. Especially when Brenda, as the weeks rolled on, began to throw out certain dark hints, and make mysterious allusions which she refused to explain. She asked questions about taxi fares and railway fares, and once when Peggie talked about the flower-show, she said she probably should not be there for it.

"Why, old sport! Are you going to pop off or elope?"

"Neither," blushed Brenda, looking uncomfortable, "only—well! I probably shan't be there—that's all!"

"Going to get expelled?" laughed Louise. "Wait till the cycle parade is over. We shall want every machine we have for the show. How are you going to work it, old thing?"

But Brenda shook her head more mysteriously than ever.

"I can't—I daren't tell you! It's a secret at present. But you'll find out some day. A girl of fifteen oughtn't to be treated like a baby. She's quite old enough to choose for herself where she wants to live."

"Are you the said girl?" asked Louise curiously.

"Perhaps I may be, perhaps I mayn't. Don't try to know any more, for I mustn't tell!"

This enigmatical attitude was puzzling, and both the cousins agreed that there was certainly "something in the wind" where Brenda was concerned, the exact nature of which they were not able to guess. They realized that she rather enjoyed posing as heroine, or she would not have mentioned the matter at all, but they sympathized immensely, and were ready to listen to any interesting details that might be divulged. Meantime Brenda, inwardly pondering over secrets, took her usual outward part in the school life, and played tennis and cricket as if she were an ordinary girl and not a bone of contention and a subject of quarrel.

Somerton College, which possessed a farm and many acres of land, had several large hayfields, and towards the end of June, when the grass was ripe and the mowers had done their work, the whole school turned out for an Arcadian revel and tossed hay. It was an annual event, and one which they much enjoyed, especially as tea was carried into the meadows and they sat on the sweet-smelling cocks eating scones and jam tartlets, and feeling they were "back-to-the-land" workers who had earned their picnic. Several afternoons were devoted to this agricultural pastime, and two large stacks, the result of their labors, stood at the back of the farm buildings. On the fourth day, when everybody was busy as usual "doing her bit", Brenda, who had been growing more and more mysterious in her communications, beckoned Louise aside into the shelter of some bushes.



"I've something to tell you!" she confided. "I want you to help me. Auntie and I have decided that we can't be separated any longer, and *I'm going to run away with her!* She's to have a taxi waiting in the lane below at half-past three. I've hidden my suit-case in the hedge all ready. Will you walk with me down the field, because it won't look so marked as if I went all alone? Miss Jones doesn't like to see us wandering about by ourselves. I thought I might trust you!"

"So you can!" answered Louise impulsively. "So this was your big secret! Have you told Pegs?"

Brenda shook her head. The fact was she considered Louise the more vulnerable of the cousins, and the more likely of the two to give her the support she wanted.

"We'll stroll as if we were just tired of tossing hay, and taking a turn to hunt for flowers," she suggested. "The taxi is to hoot when it arrives in the lane. I'm so excited I don't know what to do with myself."

Such a Gretna Green affair as running away with your own aunt in a taxi appealed to Louise. She thought it a brilliant idea, and was perfectly willing to act cover to Brenda's retreat. The two girls walked nonchalantly along the hedgerow, picking bunches of wild roses, till sheltered by an elderberry tree, they managed to skip over a wooden fence into the field that bordered the lane. Here they sat under the shade of a bush, and waited for the hoot of the motor.

Meantime something else that intimately concerned Brenda was happening at the school. Peggie had been sent from the hay-making to deliver a message at the

office, when who should come out of the study but Miss Penrose herself and a gentleman.

"Here's one of the girls! She'll take you to the field if you care to see what our young people are doing. I'm so sorry I can't go with you myself," said the head mistress, addressing her visitor, then turning to Peggie she continued, "Is Brenda making hay? This is Mr. Farrant, her guardian. Will you show him the way to the meadows and find Brenda for him? Tell her I say she may have an exeat for this afternoon."

Deeply interested, Peggie started forth as guide. Mr. Farrant was middle-aged and good-looking and extremely pleasant. He asked many questions about the college, and made himself so agreeable, as they walked along, that she began to think that Brenda was an extremely lucky girl to have so jolly a guardian. Arrived at the hay-field Peggie made a search for her friend, and asked various parties of workers if they had seen her.

"Are you wanting Brenda?" said Joyce. "Why, she hopped over that hedge with Louise only a few minutes ago. You'll find them in the next field."

So across the fence went Peggie and Mr. Farrant, and were fortunate enough to land on the other side just in time to catch a vision of the objects of their search whisking over a stile into the lane, in response to the insistent hooting of a motor-horn.

"Brenda! Louise!" shouted Peggie, and started running.

Never was elopement so neatly nipped in the bud. The runaway was in the very act of stepping into the

## Captain Peggie

taxi, and the driver was starting his engine, when on to the scene hurried Peggie and the astonished guardian, like people in the third act of a play. Mr. Farrant took one comprehensive glance at the taxi and at the very pretty lady inside, and at Brenda with the suit-case in her guilty hand, and seemed to grasp what was happening. He smiled with the air of a man who is master of the situation, then he said quietly and pleasantly :

“Well, Brenda! ‘I’ve been looking for you. Miss Penrose says you may have a half-holiday and come out for a jaunt with me. Is this your Aunt Miss Ingram? Please ask her if she will do us the honor of coming to tea with us in Baddesley. I left my car outside the college, but if Miss Ingram does not mind dismissing her taxi and walking back across the fields, I shall be delighted to run you both to the Wells, and we’ll have a jolly afternoon together. Shall I carry your suit-case for you? You’ll hardly want it in Baddesley, so we may as well leave it at your hostel on our way.”

Caught in the very act of kidnapping her niece, Miss Ingram could not refuse so civil an invitation, and so admirable an opportunity of discussing affairs, so she submitted, and was borne away by the triumphant guardian in the direction of the college. Peggie and Louise, immensely thrilled, returned to their hay-making, wondering how the tea-party at Baddesley Wells would go on, and who would eventually obtain possession of Brenda. They questioned her eagerly about it next day.

“I’d the time of my life!” she told them. “My



guardian took us to that swell new restaurant and gave us a splendiferous tea. He'd never met auntie before, they'd only written quarrelsome letters to one another about me, but do you know I believe he's absolutely fallen in love with her. She *is* pretty, isn't she? He says Auntie's to take me to Switzerland for August, and that he'll want a holiday himself, and he'll come and look us up. Isn't it jolly? Instead of squabbling over me they were making friends as fast as they could. You like him? Yes, he's really rather nice, and as for Auntie, every one calls her perfectly fascinating. What a joke if they make it up, and I have to act gooseberry in Switzerland! One never knows!"

With such an incipient romance dangling in the future under her very nose, Brenda settled down much more happily at school, especially as her friends called her a "lucker" for having two delightful foreign holidays in one year. The summer term suited her much better than the winter. She was not fond of organized games, and was glad when hockey season was off, and when cycle excursions might be substituted for cricket on Saturday afternoons. Peggie and Louise also signed their names on the list of those who wished to take bicycle rides, and were duly placed on certain Nature Rambles.

On the first Saturday in July fourteen girls, under charge of Miss Towers, put packets of sandwiches and cake into their cycle baskets, wheeled their machines to the front gate of the college, and started off all together in style. It was to be a whole day excursion, and they were to ride quite a long distance, with an old



castle as a definite object, and all kinds of bye-issues on the way. Each girl was provided with a small notebook, and meant to keep a record of interesting finds to be registered, on their return, in the Joint Nature Diary which was kept by the school. The weather, doubtful at first, fortunately cleared up, though a bank of black clouds behind them prophesied thunder at Somerton, to spoil cricket and tennis practice. They were riding out of the storm area and would probably escape rain altogether.

"We shall crow if they don't get any sets at all," said Louise. "Violet called me a slacker for missing tennis, but I don't care! I love all the queer beasties we find, and the flowers and ferns and things. Roy is fearfully keen on them too. They go out rambles at his school, and he's made quite a good collection. We're going to compare notes in the hols."

The wild roses were practically over, but there were flowering plants in the hedgerows, and they found many treasures as they rode along. Each girl was provided with a whistle which she blew as a signal when she spied anything worthy of interest, then a halt was called and the records were taken. Some had brought butterfly nets, and caught a few azure blues and fritillaries and clouded yellows, also a tiger moth and some burnet moths; beside a stream were some exquisite dragon flies, some with intense blue-green opaque wings and bodies, and some with transparent wings and green bodies, but they were so rapid in their flight that it was impossible to obtain any specimens. Louise had a tremendous chase after a "painted lady", a most

tantalizing coquette which would flit near to her net, but dart away with the speed of an express train.

On the banks of the river they came across a charming scene, a swan, majestically sailing along with seven little cygnets perched on her back. She landed at a gravel bed, tilted the babies into shallow water and made them paddle ashore and poke about with their tiny beaks among the stones, then she once more launched herself on the river, and the cygnets, swimming after her, scrambled again on to her motherly back, hiding themselves in the shelter of her wings till only their little heads could be seen peeping out at the world. This, of course, was a splendid record for the school nature diary. They were fortunate enough to find another treasure equally interesting and even more unusual. At the edge of a wood, Miss Towers, who seemed to possess microscopic eyes, pounced upon a wolf-spider, popped it inside a glass-lidded specimen box, and examined it with her pocket lens. It was also very much a mother, for crowded on its back were an immense number of tiny young ones smaller than a pin's head. As an experiment Miss Towers very gently and carefully detached some of them with the point of a hat-pin, and through the lens observed how they promptly climbed up their mother's legs and placed themselves again upon her back. It was such a fascinating peep into nature's ways that they spent quite a long time repeating the experiment, and passing the specimen box and lens from girl to girl, but they finally replaced the family on the bank where they had been found, hoping mama-spider would rear her brood, and

not fall a victim to some voracious bird in quest of food for her offspring.

It was really quite a wonderful day. Brenda blew her whistle for a clump of lovely butterfly orchis; Louise came upon a pale pink variety of the white evening campion, and Peggie had the immense distinction of finding a piece of seven-leaved clover, which, if the four-leaved variety is so lucky, ought to guarantee good fortune in increased ratio. She put it to press at once, between the leaves of her notebook.

The river seemed a good field of observation. While they sat eating their lunch they watched a kingfisher perching upon a twig just above the water and fishing diligently. Apparently he either did not notice the party or did not mind their presence, for he stayed at his post for at least twenty minutes, then suddenly darted away like a flash of emerald. A newt and some young frogs discovered by Peggie in the damp grass, swelled the list of finds, and to the botany sections they added flowering rush, nettle-leaved bell flower, and white rest-harrow. It was beautiful to ride along and see hedges festooned with the wild clematis, fields full of scarlet poppies, and road sides, untouched by the scythe, a mass of wild parsley, pimpernel and blue speedwell. They had been going slightly up hill for several miles, and now began to get the view over the valley through which they had come. Above them on the top of a slight eminence stood the castle which was the main object of the excursion.

"Thank goodness we're here at last!" said Brenda,



whose bicycle was of a rather heavy make, "I'm just tired of climbing hills."

"We shall be able to sprint down them going back," said Joyce, who was one of the party.

"And have the wind to help us," agreed Louise.

The girls stacked their machines together inside the gate, while Miss Towers went to a farmhouse for the necessary permission to visit the castle, which was in part of its grounds, and also to ask if tea could be supplied later on. She came back with the good news that it would be ready in about half an hour, and would be served to them at a table in the garden. The keep was in tolerable preservation, but the rest of the old fortress was in ruins, and showed broken-down ivy-covered walls and heaps of stones overgrown with a tangle of brambles. There was a little winding staircase that led up the tower on to a stretch of battlement, and from here there was a wonderful prospect over fields and green woods to actually a distant peep of the sea.

"I wonder what it felt like to live here in the olden days?" said Peggie, leaning against the low wall of the battlement and gazing with far-away eyes at the horizon. "Girls must have come up here sometimes in the Middle Ages. What did they talk about and think about?"

"Not cricket and tennis and exams, or even nature study!" said Louise.

"I suppose they'd talk about their knights and squires and what feats they did in the last tournament," ventured Joyce, "and when the next pedler would be



likely to come along and sell them fresh silks for their embroideries."

"It feels like a castle in a book. Have I read a description of it anywhere?" asked Peggie. "Oh, yes, now I know of course! It reminds me of that lovely part-song we learnt last term in the singing-class. Don't you remember?"

"I'm not in the singing-class!"

"But you heard us sing it at the concert—'My love dwelt in a northern land'."

"I didn't notice the words. What are they?"

"Oh dear! I don't know whether I can say them—I'm rather a duffer at reciting."

"Oh, go on! Don't be affected! Make a try!"

Thus urged, Peggie concentrated her thoughts, and with a little extra brain-effort remembered the song-ballad.

#### MY LOVE DWELT IN A NORTHERN LAND

My love dwelt in a Northern land,  
A dim tower in a forest green  
Was his, and far away the sand  
And grey wash of the waves were seen  
The woven forest boughs between:  
And through the northern summer night  
The sunset slowly, slowly died away,  
And herds of strange deer, silver white,  
Came gleaming through the forest gray,  
And fled like ghosts before the day.  
And oft, that month, we watched the moon  
Wax great and white o'er wood and lawn,  
And wane, with waning of the June,  
She fell, she fell, and flamed in a wild dawn.

I know not if the forest green  
Still girdles round that castle grey,  
I know not if the boughs between  
The white deer vanish ere the day :  
The grass above my love is green,  
His heart is colder than the clay.

Some of the girls liked it, but some thought it too melancholy, though all agreed that it seemed to describe the castle very well.

"It's mystic, really!" said Miss Towers. "The 'strange deer, silver white', that 'fled like ghosts before the day' were omens. Haven't you read Wordsworth's 'White Doe of Rylstone' that always appeared as a warning of the death of the head of the family? It's a very ancient North country superstition. Creepy? Well, I daresay. People believed strongly in the supernatural in those days. It was interwoven with all the romances. Take one more look across the woods, and then we must climb down again. Tea will be ready, and I don't want us to be late in starting to ride back."

There was nothing supernatural about bread and butter and honey and home-made cake, which was the fare spread before our party at the table in the farm garden. They enjoyed it in twentieth century fashion, then mounted their machines, and set forth on their return journey. It was down hill this way and they free-wheeled joyously along with the wind at their backs. Some of them were in advance of the others, who had stopped to pick more specimens, and they dismounted by a little bridge and waited for the rest to follow on. Presently the rear-guard appeared, and be-

gan to coast down the hill at considerable speed. Then just how it happened no one knew, but somehow or other Joyce lost control of her machine, and came dashing along at a simply break-neck pace. She was quite unable to turn the sharp corner at the bottom of the hill, and shrieked with fright as she headed straight for the river. Louise, who was standing near the bridge, dashed into the road, gripped Joyce as she passed, and whipped her out of the saddle. Both the girls fell, and the machine capsized a few feet away, but by Louise's plucky presence of mind a bad accident was averted. Beyond a few bruises neither was hurt, and the injuries to the bicycle were not enough to hinder Joyce from riding home upon it. She was frightened and rather shaken—that was all. There was a sequel however to the affair that night. She sought Louise in private and began to thank her.

"You saved my life," she said.

"No heroics, please! I've told you that already. I don't want to make such a fuss about it."

"But, Lu, it's true, and look here, I *must* tell you something. It's been on my mind for ages. You remember the first term you were at Brontë, and how you were brought up before the School Parliament for tying a piece of string across the passage?"

"Yes!" (Louise was listening now.)

"Well, it was I who did it. I saw you tie your booby-trap, and heard Helen scold you, and I went and set another just to rag her. Then when there was such an awful shindy about it all I was too big a coward to confess. Shall I tell Barbara?"

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"Never mind about it now; it's so long ago everybody has forgotten the whole affair."

"I'm fearfully ashamed of myself," whimpered Joyce. "I know I was a sneak."

"It was half my fault for doing it first."

"We've stopped those rags at Brontë."

"Yes, and a good thing too!"

"Oh, you are a sport to let it slide."

"What's the use of raking up old things that happened a century ago! I feel as if the world's moved on since then."

"I think," said Joyce slowly, "that we've *all* moved on somehow at Brontë. I don't know what it is, but there's a difference."

"I don't think about it at all—I know!" answered Louise. "If you really want to ask the reason, it's—just Peggie."



## CHAPTER XXI

### *Cycles and Flowers*

"I say, girls," cried Peggie one afternoon, running down the steps to Brontë garden, where a tennis set had just come to an end. "What do you think is the very latest? Barbara's just told me. There's to be a great carnival at Baddesley in aid of the hospital. They're to have a procession all round the town, and Miss Penrose says any of us who like may join the decorated cycle parade. She's arranging a contingent of us to represent the college."

"Oh good! Put me down for one!" said Helen. "I suppose it's fancy costume? What sport! We'll think out some killing things, rather!"

"Connie and I meant to be Anthony and Cleopatra at the next 'Fancy'," said Dorothy. "And here the poor old girl's bed-ridden in the san. with a temperature. Hard luck, isn't it?"

"I had a temperature last holidays," said Kathleen plaintively. "They had to fetch the doctor for me in the middle of the night, I was so hot. He said I'd eaten too many chocolates."

"You pig!" was all the sympathy she got from Dorothy. "Poor old Connie's not ill with your complaint. Now then, just let my racket alone, please!"

It's not dunce proof. Use your own, if you must rag. No thanks! I *don't* want you for my Cleopatra! If I can't have Connie, I won't be Anthony at all!"

The Baddesley Carnival was to be an important affair conducted on a large scale, with entries for decorated cars, motor-cycles, bicycles, tableaux on lorries, tradesmen's exhibits, parade of horses, and an "on foot" section. About fifty girls from Somerton formed themselves into a Fancy Brigade, and set to work to contrive wonderful costumes and decorations for the credit of the college. Peggie, Louise, Helen, Dorothy, Joyce, and Kathleen were those chosen to represent Brontë. Each of the Senior and Middle School houses was sending seven or eight members, but the Preparatory houses were not allowed to take part, as Miss Penrose was afraid that the long procession round the town would be too trying for younger girls.

"You will have to wheel your bicycles the whole way, and it will mean a walk of many miles," she explained.

It was of course considered a great honor to be included in the Somerton Brigade, but those girls who did not possess bicycles, or were otherwise disqualified, consoled themselves by the thought that "lookers-on see most of the game", and that as spectators of the carnival they would have a far better view of the procession than if they formed a part of it. All the school was to go and watch, not in one united "crocodile" for that would be impossible, but in small parties in charge of teachers. Each group was to take a different stand,

so that they could spread their numbers over the town and run as good a chance as most people of obtaining an unimpeded view.

A dozen girls from Brontë, attached to Miss Shepard's apron string, started forth on a certain July Saturday afternoon to see the fun. The stand they had selected was one of the public parks in Baddesley. They arrived early and took up places along the railings, which being slightly raised above the level of the pavement below would allow them to see over the heads of the crowd. They had a tremendously long time to wait. It was hot, and rather windy and very dusty, with pieces of paper blowing about the streets. There were many other spectators besides themselves in the park; children scrambled about and shouted; sweethearts sat on the grass; provident elderly people had brought campstools, and as time crept on more and more sightseers arrived, till those who lined the railings had to keep their places carefully, to avoid being jostled away from the front.

At last in the distance came the sound of a band and every head was turned in the direction of the music.

"Here they come! Look! They're coming!" was on all lips.

The crowd in the street below swayed with excitement. The great procession was actually filing slowly into view. First came mounted constables, then the band, playing popular airs, and escorted by a number of rough-riders, including cowboys, North American Indians, and a highwayman with a black mask and pistols. The Mayor and Mayoress followed in a car,

and after them came a succession of private cars, and motor-cycles with side-cars, all beautifully decorated with flowers and flags, and their owners in fancy costumes. Several cycle clubs came next, and fourth among them was the school contingent. Our party at the railings clapped and cheered as the banner bearing the device "Somerton Ladies' College" hove into view, and their enthusiasm was shared by the crowd, for the girls had made great efforts and had produced a really noble show. Peggie's bicycle represented "Diamond Dyes"; the wheels were covered with sections of colored paper, and she wore a skirt of red, blue, green, and yellow, with a little black velvet coat and a jaunty cap, a most becoming costume. Louise was a May Queen, all flowers and ribbons, with a tiny toy maypole fastened to her machine. Dorothy had tied balloons to her handle-bars, and they floated bravely in the wind. Kathleen had blazoned the school arms upon a large shield, which she held in Crusader fashion. Joyce was a Japanese lady with a huge paper parasol, and Helen a hospital nurse, holding aloft an enormous imitation medicine bottle. Girls from other houses had equally distinguished themselves, and the college certainly deserved the applause it received for its efforts.

Next in order came a whole club dressed as the Ku Klux Klan, in white garments and white hoods covering their faces, with eye-holes to peep through, a rather terrifying crew, who looked like a set of resurrected corpses, and caused squeals and shudders among the spectators. A section of "Old Time Cyclists" wheeled out-of-date specimens of "bone shakers" and of the



## Captain Peggie

tall bicycles of the seventies, lent for the occasion from local museums or private collections. After these marched Sunday schools, each with its own banner and with the scholars decked out to demonstrate some special design. Very pretty were the "Daffodil Children", wearing pale yellow and holding flower-clad staffs, and the "Poppy" children, with the girls in scarlet and the boys in green, while a group of fairies and elves boasted a first prize.

When the little ones had passed, and another band had discoursed music, arrived the principal attraction of the procession, a series of lorries upon each of which was arranged a tableau. These had been fitted up with great trouble and ingenuity. First came an excellent model of the hospital buildings in painted canvas, then a scene from a ward, with a patient in bed, attended by a bevy of nurses. The "Ancient Order of Druids" had tied up oak branches, beneath the shade of which sat the venerable dispensers of wisdom, holding gilt sickles in their hands. Santa Claus, with Christmas tree and sack of toys all complete, caused excitement among the juveniles, as did a "Family Lorry" full of babies, big dolls, and Teddy-bears.

There was a picnic tableau, with a party sitting on haycocks drinking tea, a Maypole with little girls holding ribbons, a group of cricketers, a tennis scene, with net, and young men in flannels. Very slowly they promenaded by, to avoid undue shaking, for it would have been difficult to hold Maypole ribbons or teacups or tennis-rackets had the sturdy dray-horses increased the pace.

Of course the Fire Brigade, gorgeous in brass helmets, attracted much attention, also the tradesmen's decorated vans, many of which were most ingenious and tasteful.

Perhaps what our schoolgirl party liked almost the best were the horses. In these days of motoring it is rare, except on military occasions, to see a collection of horsemen, yet no automobiles could compare with the sleek satin coats and the tossing bridles and trampling hoofs of the part of the procession which followed. Many of the riders were in fancy dress, and won much applause, from Charles I and his Queen, in lace and velvet, to a dear little May Queen on a tiny Shetland pony. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals had organized a donkey parade, with special prizes for the best cared for, and the "Neddies" ambled along, many of them with small children mounted on their backs bearing banners of the League of Kindness.

There were hundreds of collectors in fancy dress, who ran along the road, rattling their tins under the noses of spectators and begging for contributions towards the hospital funds. Some of them, dressed as clowns or jesters, performed amusing antics and kept everybody laughing and good tempered, in spite of the dust and the heat and the general crush. Foot-passengers in all varieties of costume, more bands, Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, Lads' Brigades, Temperance Societies, Provident Associations, City officials, and more police—there seemed no end to the long procession which took quite an enormous time to pass by. It was gone at last however, and our little party at the rail-

ings, having popped their last remaining pennies into the collecting-boxes, turned their steps back to school, where much later on they were joined by the Somerton contingent of cyclists, very tired after the five mile tramp in the procession, but elated to have "done their bit" towards swelling the funds of the hospital.

"We didn't get any prizes, which was too bad!" said Peggie. "Most of them went to the men, because they can get up much more daring things than we can. Did you see the bicycle all covered with cardboard to look like a horse, and the jockey riding it? *He* won a prize! And so did the mermaid. I don't think Miss Penrose would have *let* me be a mermaid, even if I'd happened to think of it. It was a little bit broad, with a bottle in his hand, wasn't it? But it *was* funny. He looked such a Crazy Jane of a mermaid, with his seaweed hair. Yes, I've enjoyed it. But I'm weary beyond words. Wheeling your bike at a snail's pace is more tiring than riding forty miles. I wish I could stay in bed to-morrow, but I know I can't."

One of the great events of the summer term at the college was the flower-show. It was conducted on quite orthodox lines. Each girl who wished to compete entered her exhibits in the various classes and paid a small fee for the privilege, the proceeds being devoted to foreign missions. As the prizes were given by teachers and friends there were no expenses in connection with it, and the whole of the entry fees and the entrance money were sent away to the missionaries as a contribution from the school. All the pupils at Somerton were not ardent horticulturists, but those



who had no gardens of their own were expected to turn up at the show and pay their entrance money for the good of the cause, and some of the best flowers were sold to any visitors who cared to buy them.

Great were the excitements in preparing for the event, and many were the disappointments. A thunder shower could work havoc, slugs and snails were hated enemies; protection was needed from cats and sparrows, and rabbits and moles occasionally burrowed in from the common and destroyed choice plants. Louise, who was cherishing some annuals, fixed her umbrella to shelter them, and was much concerned when it blew away in the night, and Peggie diligently put cardboard rings round her carnations to prevent them bursting their buds too soon.

There was a spell of dry weather, so watering became an anxiety; the girls saved the contents of their baths, and doled them out to particular treasures. They weeded, and hoed, and staked, and set earwig-traps, and slew woodlice, and did all in their power to give their specimens the best possible conditions of growth. Very much to their annoyance, only a few days before the show, some unknown malefactor visited the little allotments during the night and worked a considerable amount of damage. Whether cat, rabbit, or what, it had injured blossoms, scratched up roots, and spoilt some of the best annuals.

"The wretch!" cried Louise half in tears. "Just let me catch him, and I'd string him up if it were Tabby-skins himself. My beautiful *Nemophila*! I always heard cats like to roll in it."



## Captain Peggie

"I mean to stay out and watch when it's growing dark to-night," said Peggie, "and if it is Tabbyskins, I'll——"

"You'll what?"

"Throw a canful of water over him, I think!"

"I'll stop with you then, and have the can handy. It would scare him away at any rate."

Feeling as if they were on the look-out for a marauding tiger, the two girls took up sentry duty after sunset, armed with a syringe which they had borrowed from the gardener.

"I'm not sure that it mightn't be some of those Gaskellites playing a mean trick on us," ventured Louise grimly. "Just let them try! I'm ready for them."

"But we didn't find any footprints!"

"Oh, they're clever enough to hide them!"

It was really getting quite dark. In another few minutes the bell would ring calling in all stragglers from the garden. As the girls stared through the dusk, Louise, whose sharp eyes had been trained on the African veld, saw a faint agitation among a bed of poppies, and some moving object passing stealthily along. With equal guile she crept up, made a dash and a grab, and caught—a fine young hedgehog who was about to browse among Peggie's carnations. She was delighted to have captured the little fellow, partly for the sake of the garden, and partly because she had never seen a hedgehog before, and hoped to keep him for a pet. She carried him indoors to show to an admiring circle, and tucked him up in a wooden box with some straw,

gave him some bread and milk for refreshment, and put a heavy weight on the lid of the box, leaving a chink for ventilation. But he was stronger and craftier than they imagined, and in spite of these excellent precautions he succeeded in breaking his prison during the night and making his escape.

“What an adventure he’ll have to tell his friend!” said Louise. “Well, never mind! It’s the Show to-day, so he can’t do any more damage. I’m going to abandon my plot afterwards; I’m tired of hauling jugs of water and squashing snails. The plants will have to take their chance.”

All entries had to be delivered in the big hall by one o’clock, so about half-past twelve, numbers of competitors, excused from cricket for the purpose, came carrying pots of fuchias and fancy pelargoniums or specimens of flowers. These were placed in their different classes upon long tables, in preparation for the judging, which was to take place at half-past two. In order to avoid any shadow of favoritism, Miss Penrose had arranged for that rôle to be filled by a gentleman from a distance, who was connected with a horticultural college, and who knew the prize points of the various entries, though he did not know any of the girls in the school. For half an hour he shut himself up with the flowers, putting the envied little cards, with first, second, or third prize, to the specimens he considered best. At three o’clock the show was open to the general public.

Peggie and Louise paid their sixpences at the door and walked in with many thrills. There was a whole

## Captain Peggie

table full of Pelargoniums, and first prize had gone to Austen, but, oh joy! Brontë had won a second and Joyce might be congratulated for it. Pansies, neatly exhibited on sheets of white paper, were plentiful this year, but the biggest and darkest of all was Peggie's, while Louise had won a "first" for her annuals. It was a great triumph for Louise, as she had not before contributed any distinction to Brontë.

"I shall have that card framed and glazed and hang it up in my cubicle," she declared. "I don't mind about the actual prize itself—it's a little purse, and I have three already—but it's the honor of winning. Peggie, do you realize I've won a distinction? You're always rubbing Brontë into me, so you ought to be pleased. It will be put down in the hostel record-book: July 16th, First Prize Annuals at Flower-show—

Louise Roper.

And anybody looking at the book ten years hence will find *my* name. Think of that! I didn't know I was going down to posterity! Aren't you proud of your cousin? Why don't you help me to crow?"

"You absurd child!" laughed Peggie. "No one might ever have won a prize before. But if you're so keen on getting distinctions go on and see what you can do for Brontë next term. I shall be in Austen by then, so I leave the field to you."

"It's worth thinking about!" said Louise. "If I once take an idea into my head I often do it. Suppose I try very hard and win heaps of distinctions, could I ever become captain?"

“Ah, that’s another matter entirely. Miss Croft and Miss Penrose choose the captain, and it needs other qualifications besides distinctions.”

“What sort of things? There, you needn’t tell me, it’s straightness and squareness and a kind of general all round niceness. *You* were the very one for it, Pegs! We’ll miss you when you go on to Austen. I shouldn’t think there’s ever been a captain as good as you before.”

“*I!* What nonsense! Why, I’ve done hardly anything at all for the house!” said Peggie, as she walked away.



## CHAPTER XXII

### *Peggie's big Score*

It was getting quite towards the end of the term. In another ten days Somerton would break up, and motor-buses would carry girls and luggage to the station again. Peggie, standing in her captain's bedroom, and looking round the walls at the mottoes she had hung up there last autumn, was reviewing the events of the school year. On a card, in a conspicuous place on the mantelpiece, was a list of the distinctions gained by Brontë. Peggie had just finished printing it. She was going to carry it downstairs and pin it up on the notice-board in the hall.

#### DISTINCTIONS RECORD

December 14	
Christmas Play	Maggie Fowler
February 23	
Hockey	Dorothy Carter
March 28	
Art Study Sheet	Helen Armstrong
July 15th	
Flower-show :	
First Prize, Pansies	Peggie Paget
First Prize, Annuals	Louise Roper
Second Prize, Pelargoniums	Joyce Blackwood

Peggie screwed up her face critically as she looked at it. After all it did not seem very much to boast about. It was better than last year, certainly, but nothing, oh! nothing to what she had hoped.

"I meant to do three big things," she said to herself, "something athletic, something clever, and something heroic. Oh dear! I haven't done any of them! First prize for pansies isn't a proud honor to offer to your house. I'm almost ashamed to put it down. If Annie Hall had stayed and been captain instead of me! She was a blazing girl. She'd have carried all the school before her, and made Brontë's name shine. I'm afraid I'm rather a failure. I don't seem to have managed anything particular, except to just muddle along. I suppose I'm an ordinary, commonplace girl, and not a genius. That's the truth of it!"

Commonplace! It is rather humiliating to put oneself down under that heading. Peggie sighed, shrugged her shoulders, and then suddenly remembered a quotation in the birthday book which her mother had given her at Christmas. It had struck her fancy before. She took down the book and turned over the pages. Here it was, for 28th February:

"A commonplace life we say, and we sigh,  
But why should we sigh as we say?  
The commonplace sun in the commonplace sky,  
Makes up a commonplace day.  
The moon and the stars are commonplace things,  
And the flower that blooms, and the bird that sings;

## Captain Peggie

But dark were the world, and sad our lot,  
If the flower failed and the sun shone not;  
And God, who studies each separate soul,  
Out of commonplace lives makes His beautiful whole."

"Well! We can't all be geniuses!" reflected Peggie. "Some of us have to be very 'wee, modest, crimson-tippit flow'rs'. Why didn't fate give me 'curly brains'? Oh bother! I've done what I could for Brontë, and there's an end of it. If you're not clever you're not—and you can't help it."

Peggie walked downstairs, pinned her card on the notice-board, and strolled into the garden. Some of the younger girls were standing near the steps, and when they saw her they scuttled away quickly. They were hinneying in a rather nasty manner, and Kathleen, who had formed one of the group, dashed from them, and passing Peggie, ran into the house. The girl was palpably crying, though she turned her head to hide her tears.

"What's the matter with Kathleen?" Peggie asked Louise, who was seated on the steps.

"Oh it's only Joan and Betty and Lena and that crew! They're ragging her because her mother is going to stay at the Falcon Hotel. It's perfectly ridiculous."

"And why shouldn't her mother stay at the Falcon Hotel, I should like to know?"

"Because they say it's not as good a hotel as the 'Royal'. They told her all the girls' parents always stayed at the 'Royal'. It's the 'thing to do', they said."

"The disgusting little snobs!" snapped Peggie. "How perfectly horrid of them! *Those* aren't Somerton standards!"

"A lot of them think the same," said Louise. "They asked me if Dad and Mums were coming to the Pupils' Concert, and where they would stay in Baddesley. I said they were in Scotland, so that settled them. But they look down on anyone whose people only stay at the 'Falcon' instead of the 'Royal'. I can't see that it matters myself!"

"It *doesn't* matter!" exploded Peggie. "I'm disgusted with them for thinking so. I've a good mind to tell them my opinion of them. But no! They'd probably only snigger. I've a much better idea than that. Oh, quite a glorious brain-wave. If I can manage to wangle it, it will be fine. I'll teach them that other people haven't such silly notions. Then perhaps they'll be ashamed of themselves."

Peggie's idea was this. She had that morning received a letter from her godmother, Miss Edith Spencer, a gifted public singer who had already made a reputation for herself in the musical world. She told her godchild that she was coming on Saturday to Baddesley, to fulfill an engagement at a concert at the Wells. "I'm tired, and need a rest, so I shall stay for the week end in Baddesley," she wrote. "Can your house mistress recommend me a quiet hotel? And will she allow you and six of your schoolfellows to come to tea on Sunday? I promise to sing to you afterwards." To send Miss Spencer to the comfortable but despised Falcon Hotel, and to take some of the Brontë girls to tea there,



## Captain Peggie

would surely be an excellent way of overcoming this foolish prejudice. Miss Croft had already given permission for the jaunt, and had told her she might depend upon the lucky six receiving exeats.

"I shall ask Louise, Connie, Dorothy, Kathleen, Joan, and Betty," resolved Peggie. "Joan and Betty don't deserve it, but I believe it's the only thing to cure them. It's just ignorance on their part."

The concert at which Miss Spencer was to sing was to be a very special one, with many high class artistes, and Miss Penrose, always anxious for the musical education of the school, decided at the eleventh hour to telephone for tickets, and to take about sixty of the girls. They came back in raptures. There had been a famous violinist, and an excellent pianist, and some orchestral pieces, but most of all they enjoyed the singer.

"Her top notes were exquisite. Didn't you love 'Solvieg's Song'? and that little encore?" said Barbara. "I'd give the world to hear her again!"

"We're going to tea with her to-morrow," boasted Betty. "She promised to sing to us."

"*You!* Well, you are a lucker! How have you managed that?"

"She's Peggie's godmother, and she has invited us."

"Well, I only wish she had invited *me*, that's all! It would be heavenly to sit in a quiet room and listen to her."

On Sunday afternoon, in their cool tussore silk dresses, with best brown-banded school hats, seven excited girls set out for Baddesley, under the escort

of Miss Croft, who was going to visit her sister, and would leave them at the "Falcon" and call for them again at 5:30. The little hotel, if smaller and less pretentious than the "Royal" was very comfortable and had a sweet, flowery garden. Miss Spencer received her guests on the lawn and took them to a creeper-covered veranda, where tea for eight was laid. When you are a schoolgirl, with a sweet tooth for sugary cakes, it is a great event in the term to be invited forth for tea, and to have shrimp paste sandwiches, and scones and honey, and cream puffs, and macaroons, and almond nuts, and spongecake with lemon cheese inside, and strawberry ices. Miss Spencer was a delightful hostess, she talked about great musicians whom she had met, and told them tales about her student days, and the various adventures she had had in travelling to sing at concerts.

"Once I was going to Petersham and the line was flooded and the train had to stop. I managed to walk two miles to the nearest town and hire a car to take me on, and I arrived just in time to dress for my concert. And another journey my luggage was lost, and a friend had to lend me a dress to sing in. Fortunately it fitted me, and was a very pretty one. There are all sorts of humorous things in a professional life. They don't seem funny at the moment, but one laughs at them afterwards. At one concert a celebrated tenor had forgotten to bring his songs. He could sing them all right without music, but how was the accompanist to manage? Somebody dashed out into the town, and luckily was able to buy copies; he returned with them,

only five minutes before the tenor was due to walk on to the platform. And again another time a violinist got cramp in his arm, and we had to set to work and massage him before he was fit to play. The audience little knows all the agonies of the green room. Would you like to go into the house now and I'll sing to you?"

The drawing-room was almost deserted, so the girls had it practically to themselves. They found comfortable arm-chairs and prepared thoroughly to enjoy a half-hour's treat. Miss Spencer had sung well at the concert the night before, but to this small and highly sympathetic audience she sang better than ever. She was good natured, and gave them song after song till Miss Croft called to take them away, and even then she added an encore for the special benefit of the house mistress.

"Oh, it was lovely! I've never enjoyed myself so much in my life—anywhere," said Betty, on the way back to school. "What a dear little hotel! It's far more comfy than the 'Royal', really. I believe Mother would like it next time she comes to Baddesley."

"I was just thinking the same," said Joan. "I shall tell my people about it when I go home."

"My mother is coming there on Thursday!" remarked Kathleen.

"So you said. I think she's lucky to get rooms."

Peggie, who overheard the conversation, smiled to herself. Betty and Joan had entirely altered their views, and seemed now to be approving of the maligned "Falcon" instead of teasing Kathleen about it.

"They deserved their heads bumped together, instead of having a treat," she thought, "but it would only have made them more stupid about saying everyone ought to stop at the 'Royal'. Now they know!"

So the sun had conquered again where the wind would have failed, as wise Æsop wrote in his fable more than two thousand years ago, and the little ugly piece of snobbishness which had cropped up in Brontë had happily vanished.

Life at the college during the final week of term was described by the girls as "hectic". There were so many last things to be done. The exams were not over until the Wednesday, then there was a tennis tournament, and an Art Exhibition and Pupils' Concert to which parents were invited. Everyone had to begin to collect her personal possessions, as these must be taken home for the holidays. Many of the girls would be transferred to other houses next September, and might leave nothing behind in their old hostels.

The very last Saturday of all was an exciting day for Brontë. During the summer term it was an established custom for each house to make a *char-à-banc* excursion to some famous beauty spot. Now Austen, Mitford, Eliot, Gaskell, Cavell, Nightingale, Alcott, and Greenaway had all accomplished their motor picnics, but Brontë, owing to a misunderstanding with the owner of the garage, had missed its turn in June, and could not secure another date until now. It was better late than never, however, the whole hostel was keen to go and glad to clutch at this opportunity, so finals at tennis were thrown over, and the *char-à-banc* was engaged.



## Captain Peggie

to drive them to Refton Caves. On the day before the expedition Peggie was talking to Hilda Rowe, a girl who was in the same form as herself. Hilda was a member of Nightingale, but she and Peggie were very friendly in school, and they were both entered at Austen for next term, and had already put down their names for cubicles in the same dormitory there.

"You *are* a lucky thing to be going to Refton," said Hilda. "I've wanted to see those stalactite caves all my life. I tried to get Nightingale to vote for Refton, but they went to Lansdown Lake instead, and I was in the sanatorium with a sore throat, so I lost our jaunt altogether."

"What a shame! And I know Refton so well. I've been there four times, and I'm really almost tired of looking round the caves."

"Wish you could swop with me, then!"

"Why, I might! I don't care much about going. I'd just as soon stay behind and play in the finals. Suppose I could fix it with Miss Croft, would Miss Cyark give you an exeat?"

"Yes, I'm almost sure I could arrange it! Oh, what a trump you are! Think of seeing the caves after all! Are you *certain* you don't mind?"

"Not a scrap! I'll speak to Miss Croft about it after dinner."

The house mistresses of Brontë and Nightingale made no objection to the exchange, so on Saturday, Hilda, all smiles, came to take her place in the motor excursion. The big gray char-à-banc was drawn up on the steep road outside the college gates, and the girls,

with their picnic baskets, climbed into it and took their places. Peggie stood by the road side ready to wave her handkerchief as a final salute. Miss Croft and Miss Sheppard had settled into seats at the back with Helen, Connie, and Enid next to them, Betty and Lena were in front, and the rest came in between in rows of five or six. Everybody was smiling and radiant, and thoroughly prepared for an enjoyable jaunt. The driver threw away the fag-end of a cigarette, walked round to the front of his car, and started the engine. Then suddenly a most awful thing happened. Shaken perhaps by the vibration of the engine, or accidentally touched by one of the lively passengers, the brake slipped, and the great char-à-banc began to move forward down the slope. It jumped forward, knocked the driver flat on his back, and passing over him, commenced to lumber unguided down the road. Shrieks of horror rose from the passengers, for they were at the top of a hill, and with the impetus which the car would soon attain on its downward course they seemed likely to be launched into eternity. Could anything save them? Or were they doomed to rattle along at an increased pace until they crashed into the wall at the corner?

Now Peggie had been standing a short distance in front, to wave good-bye. She witnessed the disaster, and as the char-à-banc came lumbering up, she made a rush and a dash at it, and somehow—she never knew quite how—managed to catch on and to scramble up the steps. She pushed frantically past Betty and Lena, reached the driver's seat, closed the throttle, shut off

the petrol and put on both the foot- and hand-brakes. The big motor slid on for a few yards, then came to a standstill. The girls climbed out at once, and stood in the road as those who had escaped a catastrophe. The driver had been thrown on the ground, but the body of the car had passed clear over him without injury. He picked himself up and came running after the *char-à-banc*. His face was white as chalk and his voice shook as he gasped:

"It might have been an awful accident. I've been driving for five years, and I've never seen that happen before. It was a mercy, Missie, you stopped her!"

The picnic party was terribly upset. At first nobody wanted to continue the jaunt, but when the driver had been taken into the college and refreshed with hot coffee, and the brake thoroughly tested, Miss Croft decided that it would be a pity to forego the excursion.

"Such a thing is not likely to happen again. The driver says one of you must have inadvertently released the foot-brake," she told the alarmed girls. "This man has taken us out before, and I'm sure we can rely upon him that the brake is in perfect order."

"We might have been in the hospital or the cemetery but for Peggie," said Dorothy.

"How did you manage it, Peggie?" asked the girls, who were ready to idolize their captain for her prompt deed.

"I don't know! I saw the car coming and made a plunge. I knew which was the brake, because I've sat next to the driver on *char-à-bancs* before, and I've watched them put it on. I learnt to drive a little my-

self last summer, too, when I was staying with an uncle. I like to know about brakes and things."

"It's a useful piece of knowledge that has saved a serious accident to-day," said Miss Croft gravely.

Half an hour late the char-à-banc started off for Refton, and Peggie, who stood waving her handkerchief, turned and went back into the college, not to play tennis, but to go to Nurse at the sanatorium to ask for cold cream, for she had scraped her shins badly in clambering up the steps of the car, and they were beginning to feel painful. The news of what she had been able to do soon spread over the school, and somewhat to her embarrassment she found herself quite a heroine. There were no special "distinctions" for "presence of mind", but everybody felt that Brontë had scored, and made a record in the annals of Somerton.

On the last evening of the term Miss Croft called Peggie into her study.

"I want to give you this," she said, handing her a green suede-covered volume of *Helpful Thoughts from Great Minds*. "I think you'll like the quotations in it. Will you keep it in remembrance of a most successful year as Captain of Brontë? I congratulate you, Peggie."

"Oh, Miss Croft, I've done nothing for Brontë! Nothing except stop the char-à-banc, and anybody with an ounce of sense, standing where I was, would have done the same! It's the *others* who've won all the distinctions!"

Miss Croft smiled quietly.



"I know who's been at the back of it all. It's sometimes more useful to spur other people on to do things than to do them yourself. That's the triumph of a good leader. It has helped Brontë much more to raise the tone of the house than to win goals at hockey or to get the prize at the tennis tournament. I know most things that happen in this hostel, and I can see the difference since you've been captain here. It was what I asked you to do, last September, and you've done it."

As Peggie came downstairs after the interview in the study, the girls were waiting for her, and called her into the sitting-room. Something important was evidently going to happen. Helen acted as spokes-woman.

"We've all of us subscribed to give you this, Peggie. It's a souvenir of having stopped the char-à-banc. Please accept it from the house."

In a dainty blue velvet case lay a lovely little gold bangle, and on a card with it was neatly printed:

To

the nicest Captain that ever was,

From

BRONTË.





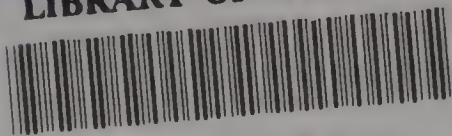








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